

JUNE 1949

DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

20c

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DIME



JUNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

COMBINED WITH 10 STORY MYSTERY

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DEVIL-DOLL!**

by **TALMAGE POWELL**

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Volume 38

June, 1949

Number 3

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Strange terror stalked the twisted streets of New Orleans when lovely, exotic Vasha danced the Juju—the dance of death!

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THE EPICURE

By

BUDD HOWARD

Herr Denke had a most peculiar appetite. Very rare, too — thank God!

A MAN with warehouses full of the finest weinerschnitzels, cheeses, anchovies, and other epicurean delights can be expected to develop extraordinarily fastidious tastes in food.

So it was with Karl Denke, grocery king and respected citizen of Muenster-



A strange light danced in Herr Denke's eyes. . .

berg, Germany. You could tell it by the large, rounded belly that preceded him down Muensterberg's streets, and by the strange light that danced in his eyes when he spoke of food. A real connoisseur of food, Muensterberg's burghers called him.

That Herr Denke's classic rotundity was achieved in no ordinary manner was discovered through a young German named Vincent Oliver. Oliver was young, ambitious—and jobless. So when he heard that Herr Denke was in need of a secretary, he applied for the job.

He was very unlucky. He got the job. He hadn't been working for Herr Den-

(Continued on page 111)

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POPULAR FILMS

Good Movie-Going For Fiction Fans

Palmer Picks:

For Murder Drama: "Too Late for Tears" with Elizabeth Scott, Dan Duryea and Don de Fore (United Artists).



Mysteriously, Jane Palmer (Elizabeth Scott) and her husband acquire a leather bag containing a fortune in cash.

Although she is determined to keep it, her husband thinks differently and checks it at Union Station. With the help of a black-mailing crook (Dan Duryea), Jane drowns her husband, but they fail to find the claim check for the money. The husband's sister and a stranger (Don de Fore), who arrive on the scene, locate the check. Jane takes it at gun's point, sheds herself of the blackmailer with a well-administered dose of poison and flees to Mexico.

The sister and stranger follow her, unravel the plot and bring Jane to a just end.

Suspensefully played, the picture makes for some spine-tingling moments.

• • •

For Adventure: "Canadian Pacific" with Randolph Scott and Jane Wyatt. (20th Century-Fox). Cinecolor.



Building this famous Canadian railroad was more than just ties and trestles—at least according to this version where it takes six-guns and two-fisted action by Tom Andrews (Randolph Scott) to overcome bad whites and renegade Indians.

Although Andrews has a temporary love affair with a female doctor (Jane Wyatt) in the railroad camp, it is his own true love, a French-Indian girl, who warns him of the Indians' plan to attack the camp. Andrews goes on a private sortie to prevent the signal for the attack from being given and gets the ringleaders—but too late. Returning to camp he joins the fight which the Indians abandon after they hear the whistle from a relief train.

The railroad background gives a different flavor to this outdoor action picture. Plenty of bang-bang and dust-biting keep it fast paced.

• • •

For A Western: "The Red Pony" with Myrna Loy, Robert Mitchum, Louis Calhern, Sheppard Strudwick, Peter Miles (Republic). Technicolor.



Not in a sense a true Western, but a picture laid against a ranch and a boy's dream about a pony come true, which even the most calloused Western picture-goer will find moving. As the story unfolds you can see the boy (Peter Miles) growing apart from his father (Sheppard Strudwick) through his love for his pony and the hero-worship of a ranch hand (Robert Mitchum) who helps him raise the animal. Myrna Loy, as the mother, understands the boy and helps him out.

A simple story, well-told and rich in human values and colorful backgrounds.

• • •

For Sports: "Take Me Out To The Ball Game" with Frank Sinatra, Esther Williams, Gene Kelly (MGM). Technicolor.



Imagine Frank Sinatra and Gene Kelly, as vaudevillians turned baseball players, fielding "hot ones" for a baseball team owned by Esther Williams. Silly, but nonetheless fun. When a gambler (Edward Arnold), who is betting against the team, inveigles Kelly to direct the chorus at a night club, Kelly begins to slip from the loss of sleep and is benched. Eventually, wised up by a little gal who is sweet on Sinatra, he gets back in the line-up.

The picture—and the baseball—are played for the laughs.

by Ted Palmer

"I WAS ASHAMED OF MY FACE"

until Viderm helped make my skin clearer in one short week"

(FROM A LETTER BY E. S. JORDAN, DETROIT, MICH.)

If your face is broken-out, if bad skin is making you miserable, here is how to stop worrying about pimples, blackheads and other externally-caused skin troubles.

JUST FOLLOW SKIN DOCTOR'S SIMPLE DIRECTIONS



IT DOESN'T PAY to put up with a broken-out face. Your very success in business, love and social life may depend upon your looks. Nobody likes to look at a face that is blemished by blackheads or pimples. **WOMEN ARE ATTRACTED TO MEN WHO HAVE SMOOTH, CLEAR, HEALTHY-LOOKING SKIN.** Business executives don't choose men whose complexions are against them. And it's just plain foolish to take chances with your happiness and success in life when the Viderm formula can do so much to give you the clearer, blemish-free face you want.

Good-looking Skin Is Not for Woman Only

You—yes, you—can have the same handsome complexion, free from externally caused skin troubles, simply by giving your face the special care that screen stars give theirs. *Because, remember!—a good-looking, handsome appearance usually begins with the condition of your skin.* There's almost nothing to it—it is just about as easy as washing your face. *The whole secret consists of washing your face in a way that thoroughly purges the pores of every last speck of dirt and grime—something that ordinary cleansing seldom does.* In fact, examination after examination shows that, usually, it is not a case of "bad skin" so much as faulty cleansing that leaves oily grime clogging up your pores. What you should use is a highly concentrated soap like Viderm Skin Cleanser. This penetrates the pores and acts as an antiseptic. Specks of irritating dirt and grime are quickly loosened. They dissolve and disap-

pear, leaving your skin entirely free of the dirt particles that otherwise remain as pimples, blackheads and other externally-caused skin troubles.

Squeezing pimples or blackheads to get rid of them is a nasty, messy business—but that isn't the worst of it. Doing so may also be injurious and leave your face with unsightly, embarrassing blemishes. There is, now, a much easier, safer, cleaner way to help you rid your face of ugly, offensive, externally-caused skin troubles. *You merely follow a doctor's simple directions.*

Don't murder your skin! Here's all you have to do to get it smoother and clearer and to keep it that way. Use Viderm Skin Cleanser when you wash your face. Rub the rich lather of this highly-concentrated medicated soap on your face for just a few seconds and then rinse it off. Then apply a little Viderm Medicated Skin Cream and that's all there is to it. Viderm Medicated Skin Cream quickly disappears, leaving your skin nice and smooth. This simple treatment, used after shaving, helps heal tiny nicks and cuts, relieves razor-burn and smarting, besides conditioning your skin.

DON'T DO THIS!

Don't murder your skin by squeezing it. Skin is delicate. When you break it, you leave yourself open to malaria. It's far easier, far safer, to let the Double Viderm Treatment help you enjoy a handsome, clearer, blemish-free complexion.



Give Your Face This Treat for 7 Days

Stop worrying and being embarrassed over what may happen to your skin. Just send for your Viderm Double Treatment this minute, and be confident of a smoother and clearer complexion. Follow the simple directions, written by a doctor, that you will get with your Viderm Double Treatment. Then look in your mirror and listen to your friends admire your smoother, clearer skin—the kind that women go for.

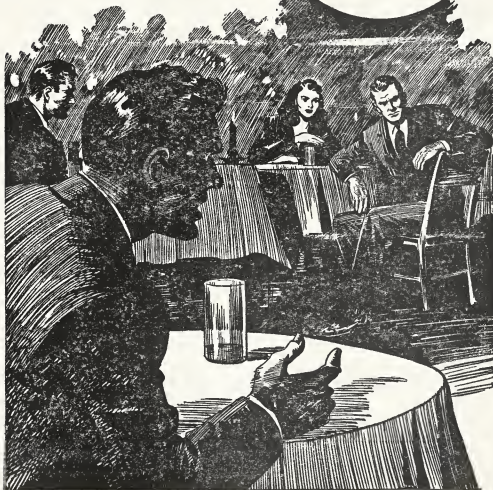
Just mail your name and address to The New York Skin Laboratory, 206 Division Street, Dept. G-1, New York City 2, N. Y. By return mail you will receive both of the Viderm formulas, complete with full directions, and mailed in a plain wrapper. On delivery, pay two dollars plus postage. If you wish, you can save the postage fee by mailing the two dollars with your letter. Then, if you aren't thrilled with results, your money will be cheerfully refunded. Remember that both of the formulas you use have been fully tested and proven, and are reliable for you. *If they don't help you, your treatments cost you nothing. After you have received your Viderm, if you have any questions to ask concerning abused skin, just send them in.*



CHAPTER ONE

Juju

HE KNEW she was somewhere ahead of him in the mist. He drew up, his breathing rapid and shallow, and paused to listen for her. His surroundings brought an unreasoning fear to life inside him, the way he had always felt in the clutch of a dream. Heat blasted and moisture-rotted, the trees about him stood out grotesquely in the heavy ground mist that had rolled in off the swamps and

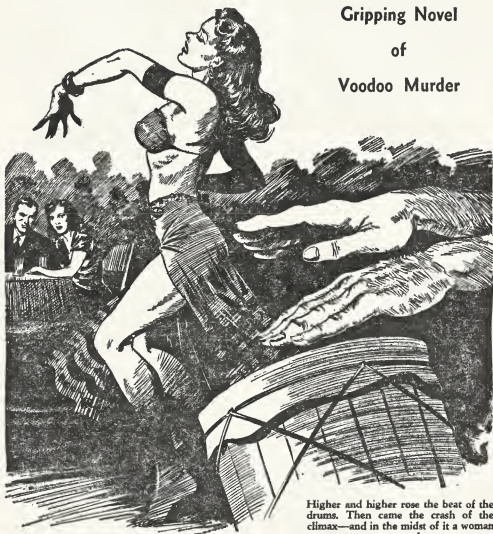


DANCE, LITTLE DEVIL-DOLL!

Gripping Novel

of

Voodoo Murder



Higher and higher rose the beat of the drums. Then came the crash of the climax—and in the midst of it a woman screamed.

The steady beat of the drums pulsed through the hot, still air of the crowded night club as Vasha danced . . . with every fiber of her lovely body alive . . . to the strange, exotic rhythm of the Juju—the dance of death!

bayous. There were no stars, but somewhere a pale moon was shining, lending a faint luminous glow to the mist.

He moved forward slowly, the steamy fog slick on his face. Under his hastily tied shoes the earth was spongy, soft, miry like the mist. He had jerked on slacks and shirt, and he could feel the clothes clinging to him. He tried to reason, but he ended only in wondering. Why had she slipped from the house like that? What in blazes had brought her here in the dead hours of the hot, sullen, Louisiana night? It definitely, he thought, was not the action of a new bride!

He drew up again, panting, his hair lank on his forehead. He had lost her. She had disappeared into the wild, terrifying maw of the strange night. Her name trembled on his lips, but he didn't speak. He didn't know exactly what held the words back, what kept him from screaming out her name until he had located her. Perhaps it was some of the suspicion a few of his friends had tried to create in his mind. Standing here in the night with the naked arms of warped trees clutching at him, it was easy to remember the things some of his friends had said: "She's very nice, Rick. But after all, a Fandau to marry a nameless dancer from a New Orleans night club . . . Oh, I didn't mean it that way, really! It's only that it'll take a little time for us to become accustomed to her. She—she's so strange. . . ."

Like hell they hadn't meant it! They'd meant every malicious word of it. The only honest one in the bunch had been Colonel Withering. Snorting the words in his usual fiery, blunt, Southern fashion, the colonel had said, "You'll never have her, boy! She'll never completely be yours!"

There was something equally fiery in the Fandau blood, but Rick had held himself steady. "How so, Colonel?"

Withering glanced around to make sure his womenfolk were out of earshot. "Now

and then in New Orleans, boy—well, you know how it is when a man gets from under the shadow of a skirt for a while. I've been to Club Hobgoblin. I've seen her dance. Rick, it's as if she worships something when she dances! It's as if she's worshipping the dance itself. It's all things to her, boy. She is one of those rare women eaten by ambition, consumed by a fire that even the fire of love will not transcend."

Rick was aware of the slow mottling of his face, of the clenching and unclenching of his hands.

The colonel thrust a cheroot in his lips. "She's lovely, Rick. Breathtakingly lovely, like something out of the dim and distant dreams we have sometimes when we are young. I can't blame you for wanting her."

Damn you to hell, Colonel, Rick thought. To think that I ever regarded the Withering name as something proud, decent! You are a leech, a slug. Your mind is a thing of evil.

But he heard the colonel out. Some vicious inner raging had caused him to want to see just how far the colonel would go.

"Has she said she would give up dancing?"

"No," Rick said. "I haven't asked her."

"Ask her—you'll see. To know her, to see her in the proper times and places. . . . A smirk spread on the colonel's face. "But to marry her. . . ."

Rick hit him then. He hit him so hard he knew his wrist would be sore for a week. He knocked the colonel flat in the drawing room of the big Fandau house, and he stood over him, breath hissing through his teeth, wishing the colonel would get up so he could kill him.

STANDING now alone in the strange night mist where he had followed her, words came back to haunt Rick: "Love—ly . . . like something out of a dim and dis-

tant dream . . . a strange woman, strange, strange. . . ."

Rick shook his head to clear away the words, to cast them from the echoing corridors of his mind. Already there was poison in his mind, poison that had caused him to follow covertly when he had seen her slip out of the house tonight. A man shouldn't sneak after a new bride that way, as if he suspected her of holding some unspeakable tryst.

He jerked rigid with attention. Up ahead he had heard a faint sound. He felt tired, as if all the strength had been sapped from him. But he plunged on. There was real alarm in him now. His brain reeled in crazy circles as he tried to figure out what had brought her here. There was nothing here save desolation, only water of sullen black, a nightmarish tangle of near-tropical vegetation, the queer trees like skeletons in the mist. No one had lived here for years. There had once been a sugar plantation dead ahead. A Yankee from Chicago had bought the land, ground himself into bankruptcy because he hadn't been wise to the ways of the old river and the floods that came to this land in a vain attempt to wash it clean of a dark past of pirates and blood and aristocrats and the black hells that were the slave ships. The floods had finally whipped the Yankee; he had admitted that he'd been rooked, gone back to Chicago, and his lands had sunk back into a morass of creeping and crawling things and patient vegetation.

Yet the man's house must still be standing. Rick caught his breath. Because that forgotten and forsaken house was the only sign of civilization that he could think of in this whole area, Rick decided that sound he'd heard so faintly ahead was her progress toward the old place. But why? Why in the name of hell would she be out on a night like this, going to a deserted house deep in the marshes?

When finally he came in sight of the old house, he wondered momentarily if

he'd been wrong. He saw no sign of Vasha. And there was no sign of life in the house. It stood at the far edge of what had once been a clearing. The rutted road the Chicago man had cut to it had long since grown over with waist-high weeds. The house itself stood like something spectral in the ground fog. Like a wan breath from a creature that was tired, the tinge of moonlight touched the windows of the old place. Some of them must have been knocked out. Others shone darkly. The near end of the porch sagged, and the ridge line of the gable sagged.

Rick moved slowly out in the weed-grown clearing, looking for some sign of her. A shiver rippled down his spine, and his hair, plastered to his forehead, felt cold. He knew what his family's reactions would be if they knew he was out here tonight, searching through the darkness and mist for his bride. They were broad-minded, the Fandaus, and proud and kind. Their roots were deep, embedded in two centuries of breeding and culture. Everything had indicated that they wanted to take Vasha to their hearts as Rick had—but this kind of action they would regard as peculiar, to say the least.

A low, rhythmic beat came to Rick's ears, stilling the breath in his throat. He listened, felt the soft, distant-sounding beat insinuating itself into the ends of his nerves, the inner recesses of his mind. A drum, several drums, whispered in the night with a beat that was ages old, a beat pregnant with the black mysteries of a dark continent.

He saw Vasha then, like a quick swirling in the fog. She was moving quickly through the weeds that grew in the clearing, going toward the old plantation house.

HE WANTED to cry out her name; he licked his lips, found them salty with his sweat. Something locked and stilled his throat, and in the night the beat of drums rose in sinuous rhythm. He knew

then that there was life in the dark recesses of the rotting plantation house.

Weeds in the clearing cut into his calves as he moved forward. The house ahead loomed larger. And there was Vasha, moving like a part of the fog, as light as the mist. She heard him, and wheeled to face him.

"Vasha. . ."

"What are you doing here, Rick?"

"I might ask the same question." His whisper sounded hoarse even to his own ears. He was close to her now. He touched her arm. It felt hot; there was a vibrance, a surging in the flesh.

"The drums. . ." she said. She was looking at the house. Then she turned her face back to him. The loveliness of her caught at Rick's throat, but something hardened inside him. Her eyes glistened, her red lips were softly parted, framing the flash of her white teeth. She looked breathless, as if something in her were caught up in the muffled beat of the drums.

"Come quickly!" Rick whispered. "Come away. We'll go back. No one will ever know."

Ever know what? he asked himself. And he realized that obliquely he had voiced the evil he felt at this moment. He felt her slip from him almost as if he weren't there. He felt the evil of the night swathing him like a clammy rag. The beat of the drums matched the rhythm of his heart. The beat shook him; he was stifling, finding it was hard to breath.

"I heard her," Vasha whispered. "She didn't know I was there. She was talking with one of the servant girls in that old spring house behind your home. Through the little window I saw them. I saw her hand the girl something. It looked like a little bundle of hair that had been dipped in blood. The girl's eyes rolled and she muttered, 'Juju! Mam'lik, juju!' And when they mentioned this place, I knew I had to come, Rick!"

"Her?" Rick said. "Who? Who in

blazes is this *her* you're talking about?"

"La Broun."

Rick stared at her. Then he turned his gaze toward the plantation house. La Broun. Juju. He shivered. He wouldn't put it past her, not La Broun. She had been a servant in the Fandau household for a month or so now. She was tall and muscular, like a man. She had a face that looked as if it had been carved from seasoned walnut. She was of French, Irish, and Indian ancestry, she had said. She hadn't been liked from the beginning, but the Fandaus had needed a servant, and she had done her work with the exactitude of a living robot. She reminded Rick of that every time he looked at her—a living robot, a person with only a part of herself living in the shell of her body. Her eyes were depthless, and rarely had he looked into them directly. The one or two times he had, he had felt something evil, unclear come over him.

Beside him, Rick felt the faint movements of Vasha's body. She was swaying, without seeming to will movement at all, her dancer's body caught up in the insistent beat of the muttering drums.

"Vasha!" Rick caught her wrist.

"I must see it!" she whispered, the rapt look in her eyes spreading over her face. "I've often heard about it. That's why I came tonight. Listen to them, Rick, the drums . . . beating . . . beating . . ."

Rick listened. One part of him was cold with terror, but another part couldn't escape the hypnotism of the drums. They began to increase their tempo, and his heart kept a measured beat with them until the blood was surging through his head, his being rocking with the rhythm.

What must it be doing to Vasha, he thought. That beat. That insistent hammering against all her dancer's nerves, all her mentality that had been molded to live on rhythm, to answer it, to dance. . .

Rick moved across the clearing with her. There was a lethargy in his limbs,

yet a strange surging in them. He was close to the old house now, and he could smell its decay hanging like a pall in the mist.

He turned to Vasha to make one last appeal, then knew it would be no use. Like a willful child, she would go on. The show-woman in her was controlling her, eager to see the most macabre of all shows that must be going on under the sagging roof. The rhythm of the drums had her entranced.

Just one look, Rick told himself. Just one moment after we find that hidden room. This was something he'd always wanted to do himself. From the time he was a small boy, he'd heard snatches of the dark and forbidden talk that drifted out of the bayous, that came from the strange people who lived in the recesses of the marshes, the people who existed in a world different from the little Fandau child's world. Why not tonight? Why not an adventure with Vasha at his side?

They rounded the house. He slid his fingers along the splintery, sagging wood to guide them. Through the wood he could feel the soft vibrations of the drums.

Another corner, and now they were on the far side of the house. It was like a strip of luminous paint at first, that bit of light in the night. A window, Rick realized, that had been blinded. But the blind hadn't reached completely to the bottom.

Ground fog flowed around him; and then he was at the window, bent, trying to see through the narrow crack that spilled out the light. In the night beside him, he heard Vasha's soft breathing, in and out, in and out, in time to the soft muttering of the drums.

As he twisted his head, more of the room inside came into view. It was an old room, its door lintel sagging from age, its floor spotted and warped. Great sections of weather-stained wallpaper hung precariously from ceiling and walls from which they had peeled. The room had

long ago died, but tonight there was life in it.

CHAPTER TWO

La Broun's Curse

THERE must have been about a dozen people in the room, Rick guessed, with La Broun in the center of the circle of humanity. Rick felt a nausea as he looked at her. She was the household servant no longer. A glowing open brazier stood before her, spilling the red glow of smoldering fire over her face. She was like an idol out of an evil, long-forgotten temple. She wore a sleeveless red blouse that exposed her long, muscular, mahogany arms. A greasy black skirt flowed over her crossed legs, over the floor about her. A red kerchief was bound about her head. The firelight outlined her upraised arm. She was holding aloft a chicken that flapped once, spasmodically, then paused, as if knowing the senselessness of struggle.

The drums muttered. La Broun slowly rose to her feet, to her full height, until she towered in the room, her shadow long and moving dizzily against the wall at her back.

The drums picked up beat. The swaying bodies circled about La Broun slowly in perfect rhythm; they might have been guided by one, mad, central brain. Slack jaws, gleaming teeth, burning eyes.

La Broun raised her other hand. Now both were extended high over her head. The chicken flapped again.

La Broun's hands made motions. Bright red, gleaming in the firelight, blood spurted, coursing down in La Broun's arms.

A cry, low, thick, burst from the throats about La Broun. A rising note of madness stole into the beat of the drums.

"Juju, mam'lik! Juju!"

La Broun moved with a rapid grace of motion that was strange in a woman so

large. Forehead by forehead she touched the mass in the circle about her, leaving on each forehead the mark of blood.

The beat of the drums rose a note higher, a step further in volume. The lifeless chicken was flung from La Broun's hands, showering sparks as it landed in the brazier; flame licked up, and even outside, Rick could smell the stench of burning feathers.

A large cup made of a gourd appeared in La Broun's hands. From follower to follower she carried the cup. And the drums passed over the line of utter savagery.

Rick fought down the nausea that threatened to choke him. He closed his eyes for a moment. It was as if he were very drunk, drunk as he had never been before. Drunk on something that reached far across the ages, far back into time.

"Vasha, please. . ."

If she heard his choked whisper, she gave no sign. He heard the intake of her breath. How incredibly lovely in the mist, the night behind her, the glow from the room of carnage barely lighting her face! He followed the line of her gaze until he was looking into the room again.

A girl writhed to her feet in the room. She was young, slender, with dark hair that flowed about her shoulders. To one who knew the country as Rick did, there were traces of the old Creole in the girl, the nobility who had once ruled New France with a proud hand. But the Creole lineage of the girl had lost something over the generations; the nobility of line of her face and jaws was a mocking thing, like an imitation over base metal. She was dressed in the faded cotton print of a field hand. She began to dance, slowly at first, as if feeling out the rhythm of drums, then faster and faster. About her the bodies swayed back and forth. Voices began to chant, meaningless words, but words that rose and fell with the beat of the drums.

Firelight gleamed on the girl as she whirled toward the center of the circle, making her face a thing of stark shadows and rosy flesh. The beat of the drums rose toward frenzy, and Rick tore his eyes away.

He was aware of the trembling of Vasha's body beside him. He wanted to take her arm, scream at her to come away from here with him. The evil of the place clogged his nostrils.

But a nightmarish paralysis gripped him as he watched Vasha. She moved back from him. The ground fog swirled in around her. He saw that she was dancing. Dancing in time to the drums. Dancing as that girl inside had danced.

He couldn't breathe. He knew with a terrible kind of clarity that Vasha was a genius. As some people are born with perfect pitch, Vasha was born with an abnormal desire and ability to dance. She had copied that dance. She had brought it outside, out here with him, duplicating it to the slightest movements of hands and body.

"Jujul! Jujul!"

Rick whirled, jarred cold, nerveless, by that low guttural voice which had sounded near him.

He saw the man, a huge giant of a man, gliding toward them through the ground fog. Moonlight gave the man's face a yellow tinge and glinted on the long, naked knife in the man's hand.

RICK tried to gasp out a warning as the man closed in on him. He punched the big, swarthy face. The knife rose, gleaming. Rick's hand stabbed upward. Desperation gave him the strength to wrestle the beefy, denim-clad ox momentarily. Then, with a sudden, savage twisting of his shoulders and arms, the man had the knife at his throat.

"Run, Vasha!" Rick gasped.

The man cried to Vasha, "You run—and I'll slip this knife in his gullet!"

Inside, the drums rolled in frenzy. Vasha looked at the bright blade at Rick's throat, covered her face with her hands, and screamed. The drums stopped with a crash that brought silence ringing in Rick's ears.

He squirmed in the grip of the giant, succeeded only in pricking his skin against the knife blade. He sensed movement about him, shadows, and knew the plantation house had emptied its occupants out here.

The giant stepped back. Rick gathered Vasha in his arms. Sobs wracked her body. A fleeting thought of escape passed his mind. But the giant had been safe in releasing him. They were surrounded, he and Vasha, alone in a strange night whose moonlight reflected on eyes, of madness.

"I ruined it, La Broun," the giant said miserably. "I didn't see them until they had slipped up to the house, until I saw her dancing."

"You are fools," La Broun said. "You are Rick Fandau, are you not? Yes, the proud and mighty young master of the Fandau name and lands!" There was acid hatred in her voice, the hatred of the serving for the ones served, the acid that sometimes drips from the poor upon the rich.

"She was dancing like Lili dances," the giant said. "Juju!"

La Broun's weathered, leathery face betrayed nothing. She paid no heed to the mustering voices about her. "Do you know the dance?" she asked. "Do you know we were making juju?"

Vasha cringed against Rick, staring at the tall, angular woman's stolid face. La Broun's eyes were the only things alive in the night, glowing with the intensity of fire. "Because you have chosen to do this thing, I curse you! You must always dance. If ever you cease to dance, you will die."

The baleful words and threatening fire in La Broun's eyes brought fire to life in

Vasha as well. Rick felt her shudder, her effort to get a grip on herself. Her trembling ceased; she looked from face to face with a pride and daring that wrung Rick's throat.

"I can bear your curse! I find it no curse to spend my life dancing!"

A satanic humor stirred La Broun to smile. "But that is only part of the curse. You will achieve great success with your dancing."

"And I don't find it such a burden to think about that!"

"I'm glad to see your nerve, little one. You will need it. For still I have not completed the curse." La Broun paused. The ground mist swirled up about her ankles. Her followers crowded in upon her, waiting for her next words to fall in the silence of the turgid night. Rick found himself holding his breath. There was something compelling about La Broun's face, something that kept him from tearing his eyes away or shutting his ears with his palms . . . hypnotic . . . swathing him in evil . . . La Broun's eyes.

"At the high moment of success, little one, it will become dust in your mouth, and you will wish that your very limbs had long ago become sick with palsy!"

A voice whispered, "Juju!" Another voice took the murmur up. A low growl, settling into a chant, possessed La Broun's followers. Rick thought: This is a dream. I'll wake in a moment. It can't be happening. Hell, I'm in the civilized United States of America. I won't let it get under my skin.

But another thought followed the first—civilization was across the marshes. Civilization was around the next turn of the road, just beyond Steadman's bayou. Civilization wasn't here on a plantation that had gone to ruin, that had been deserted by all but the uncivilized. And it was already under his skin, writhing like dark worms in the tumultuous corridors of his brain.

IN A MASS La Broun and her people began to move. At a sign from the tall, mahogany-faced woman, the giant shoved Rick and Vasha to the front of the group. The pressure of the people behind carried them alongside the house, toward the front.

Rick's throat had never been more parched, even during fever on a South Pacific island once. They're not through with us! They're taking us into the house! What devilish kind of their repulsive juju are they . . .

The sagging porch steps were before him. He hung back. "It will do you no good to struggle," La Broun said.

He heard Vasha choke back a sob. He gripped her hand, his mind racing. Before him the door loomed. His fingers closed tight with crushing force on hers. When he mounted the porch, he bolted, hurling Vasha ahead of him.

Surprise gave him a split instant of time. He was through the doorway, swinging the door closed with a rush, wondering how strong the old door was.

The rusty bolt had stuck! Sick emptiness jarred through him. His sweating fingers slipped on the corroded metal. A body hit the door, almost smashing it open. He tore at the bolt, tore blood from his fingers, felt it shoot into the slot.

"Toward the back!"

He ran with an overpowering sense of disaster dogging his heels. But Vasha was beside him, and that made it worth the effort. She stumbled. He helped her on. Something solid brought him up with a crash. Another door. He jerked it open. They were in the back of the house now, in what must have once been a kitchen or pantry.

The opening of the kitchen door brought them outside. Voices rose in the night behind them, like the cries of nocturnal creatures cheated of blood. Any second now La Broun would have dispatched part of her people around the house, scat-

tered the others searching over the grounds.

"Hang on, darling! This is going to be rugged!" He gripped Vasha's arm, raced across the clearing, lunging through the miry earth and ground mist into a tangle of vegetation.

In near panic because she was beside him, far too beautiful and desirable for that howling mob back there ever to be allowed to touch her, Rick knew he must not lose his sense of direction. Yet in the night with the complication of the ground fog it was tricky.

He ran in a queer, numbed state, that panic bubbling just beneath the surface of his mind. They tore through a thicket, splashed through ankle-deep water that growled with a mutter of its own. He kept the wild voices in the night directly behind them. And gradually the voices faded.

Beside him, Vasha was gasping, even her fine, dancer's muscles faltering. And then a gladness burst within him at the sight of a small knoll that cast a low, rounded shadow in the night. Just beyond the knoll was the boundary of Fandau land.

They were safe, safe! He kept repeating that to himself, even after they had slowed and got their breaths back. He was still telling himself that when they were finally in the Fandau house, ages later. In the snug, solid shelter of their bedroom, he listened to the muffled splash of the shower as Vasha washed away the swamp muck. He slipped into a robe, sat down for a gratefully inhaled cigarette. There were only their ruined clothes in a heap near the windows to remind him that it hadn't been a dream.

La Broun of course would never show up here for work again, he was sure. But something of La Broun would stay in this house a long time, the memory of her eyes, glistening with a hungry evil. . . . Forget, he told himself, for the real danger lies in

remembering; to let it obsess you is to take a step toward madness. . . .

HE KNEW it was a futile gesture before he said anything. He sat in Mickey Livingston's office above Mickey's Club Hobgoblin in New Orleans and looked from the blond, freckled, beaming countenance of Mickey to Vasha.

She had never looked lovelier, Rick thought. Skin like the petals of fresh flowers, hair that was so black it shone blue in the late afternoon sun that flowed into Mickey's office.

"Ta, tum, tee, tum," Vasha hummed in a minor key and pirouetted with infinite grace before Rick. Her eyes reflected in their brightness the bubbling excitement that was in her. Born for excitement, Rick thought, born to dance. Well, he didn't mind. He had known how she felt when he married her. There would come a time when she would give him heirs to the Fandau name, fortune, and lands. Some day she would grace the big colonial house up in the plantation country.

But now it was different. He found that he couldn't regain his old broad-minded attitude. He felt angered at himself, sitting there looking at Mickey and Vasha who were so excited and carefree. Why couldn't he be just as buoyant? What caused this black bubble in his brain to oppress him the way it had since the night, three weeks ago, when he and Vasha had witnessed a repulsive cult performing their vile ceremonies in an old, abandoned plantation house.

Mickey reared back in his chair. "Kid, I've seen dancers and dancing. Your old Uncle Mickey has been in this night club game a long time. But you are my first real find. I'll hate to lose you—but it'll be Broadway stardom for you one of these days!"

"Darling, do you hear that?"

"Yes," Rick said, trying to keep his

tone from reflecting his melancholy.

He was aware of Vasha's gaze upon his face, but he didn't look at her. He was being a silly fool. It was mad to have such an unreasoning urge to clap his hands over his ears in an attempt to shut out the words of La Broun. In the beginning he had told himself that the danger lay in obsession. To still those words that had echoed over and over in his mind for three weeks now was not the thing to do. Laugh and forget it and let Vasha dance! And yet he said, futilely, "I rather like her old routine. . . ."

Mickey Livingston ran his fingers through his unruly blond hair and quirked his brows with that tolerance the specialist has for the layman. "Oh, come now, Rick," he chided. "I can understand your sentiment for her old routine. The dance she was doing when you first met her. But this new dance has everything, spontaneity, a depthless grace, an"—he hunted a word—"an *air*! Rick, being in business here in New Orleans has made me a cynic where music and dancing is concerned. We created jazz down here, to begin with. I've seen everything. But Vasha's new routine has the power to hold you breathless. It reaches back across time. There's something so—so fundamental about it, like the elemental worship of the sun! Nobody's ever seen anything like it before in America!"

That's where you're wrong, Rick thought. I saw the dance once before. I saw a young field hand, surrounded by crude, muttering drums, do the dance one night just three weeks ago in an old plantation house where only shadows and rot and nothing civilized existed. Her name was Lili. It was her dance. Like many good artists, Vasha has only taken something crude and brought it to perfection. Rick lighted a cigarette and squirmed in his chair, fighting the thoughts back. I'm being melodramatic as hell. I'm being a fool. It was ridiculous.

An enlightened Fandau letting an illiterate like La Broun get under his skin.

Mickey Livingston swung his feet on his desk. "We'll splash it all over New Orleans. We'll bank the bandstand with drums. Crimson and black drums. We'll light only the drummers' hands, keeping the men themselves in darkness. And then a wan glow of light, seeking, searching—until suddenly it touches Vasha. And all the while the drums are softly speaking. . . ."

"No!"

Rick and Mickey stared at Vasha.

"I'm not alone now," Vasha said. "I belong to Rick. If his feelings are against it, I can't go through with the new dance, Mickey."

"But, baby!" Mickey wailed. He turned to Rick, an imploring look on his face. "For cripes sake, tell her! Tell her this is the most wonderful thing that ever happened to a modern dance! Trust me, trust my judgment, Rick. I tell you she's headed for the pinnacle of fame!"

Rick was looking at his wife. He heard Mickey's words, but they meant nothing to him. The words Vasha had just spoken meant everything. With a glow, he thought: It's one of those perfect things a man finds only once in a lifetime.

He was a long moment in speaking. With a word he could stop her from doing this new dance. But while he knew she would never harbor a sense of denial, it would always be between them. And it would be a victory for fear, for the evil that was La Broun. This was the first test. If he gave in to that craven terror that had gnawed at him for the past three weeks, it might entrench the terror even more firmly in his mind. The thing to do was drag it out in the open, lick it, and laugh at the memory of La Broun.

"I know how much this means to you, Vasha. I think it's a chance you shouldn't pass up."

She smiled. Mickey Livingston mopped

his face, relaxed behind his desk again, puffing his lips in an enormous sigh of relief.

"We'll open next Friday," Mickey said. "Now about publicity. . . ."

While they talked, Rick strolled over to the window. From it he could see the taller buildings on Canal Street. Canal and Broad, crossroads of the South. New Orleans, a wanton, forgotten child of the old world, like a sleepy, lazy jewel in the hustle and speed of the new world.

And where was La Broun? There were a score or more of La Brouns in the city. One could see them every day in the old market. Some of them still carried burdens on their heads and wore amulets about their necks.

But one day he would see that particular La Broun again. And he would laugh in her mahogany face. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Death Dance

AT ITS inception, Friday evening was little different from many others in Club Hobgoblin. People came to dine leisurely and to escape the heat with the tall iced drinks for which the Hobgoblin was famous. As precise as their counterparts in Paris, waiters moved with the silence of shadows. A pair of cigarette girls in elfin costumes wended their slow way through the crowd. There was the usual talk, dancing, the clink of glasses, the soft rhythms of Jerry Lancaster's band.

But under all its usual appearance there was a suppressed excitement in the Hobgoblin, and talk drifted to Mickey Livingston's ears as he visited tables, talk of this strange new dance the Hobgoblin was going to present tonight.

"Is it honestly authentic voodoo, Mickey?"

"As sure as a glass eye is glass!"

"Are you going to work juju on us, Mickey?"

Nervous laughter. Mickey grinned to himself and reminded himself to give his publicity agent a raise. The lad had really put it over.

By ten the house was packed. At ten-five, Rick and Vasha entered the Hobgoblin by a side door. They paused in the corridor, listening to the chatter and music out front. In the dimly lighted corridor, Rick looked at his wife. She was nervous, he could tell. And she was pale with a deep, intense pallor that caused little wings of nervousness to twitch in Rick himself.

Opening night, of course. Wondering if the thing was going to be a flop. The intense preparation. The preparation was something Rick didn't like to think about. Something had seemed to steal in upon her in those days of rehearsal, to take possession of her, until there was an unearthly glow to her eyes, a pulsing like the beating of dark, unseen wings about her—until sometimes it seemed that it was not really Vasha dancing. It was Vasha's form and face, but a Vasha in the control of something dark and nameless that guided her through the intricate movements of the dance.

The power of suggestion of course, Rick thought tonight. The lingering effect of La Broun's words, spoken at a time and under circumstances that had caused them to make a deep impression on her subconscious. He shook his head as if shaking bees from his brain.

"You're feeling well, darling?"

He gripped her fingers, which lay on his arm. "Of course. Just a little tense for you."

Her lips lifted in a smile. "Wait in my dressing room, will you? I want to see Mickey about one more point. The lighting of the drums at the change of tempo."

He watched her move down the corridor. Then, with an almost savage swing

of his shoulders, he went to her dressing room.

The room was small, stuffy. Lights outlined her dressing table mirror. He idly touched the things on the dressing table, her cosmetics, a rabbit's foot a colored maid had once given her. She kept the darnedest things cluttering her dressing table. . . .

He felt his throat go dry. For an instant, he couldn't move his hand. The macabre little thing lay at the base of the mirror. Finally he picked it up. It was three feathers, small, downy feathers, tied together with a frayed piece of black rag. The tips of the feathers were stiff and dull brown in color. And Rick knew they had been dipped in blood.

The feathers had been resting on a grimy square of paper. He picked the scrap of paper up, read the blocky, penciled words inscribed on it:

You foolish little one! You do not know the dance, its meaning. You will make juju as we made juju! It is the dance of death and the juju of death will be made. Mark the words. Whatever happens, you are responsible!

Rick crushed the paper and the repulsive amulet in his trembling hand. The damned fool! Some smart-aleck reporter or . . .

. . . Or La Broun. Who else knew they had been making juju that night in the old plantation house? La Broun! Admit it, Rick! You broke up her mad, vile meeting; you set yourselves up as her superiors, and she resented it with a resentment that approaches madness!

He rushed out in the corridor. It was empty. He hurried down the corridor, jerked open the heavy metal door. The alley was black with night. He took the short flight of metal stairs two at a time, and then the cinders of the alley crushed under his quick feet. He found no sign of life in the alley. And when he reached the street, he saw no one prowling in

shadows. Only the usual passersby, a newsboy calling a first edition.

He turned and went back to her dressing room. She was seated at the dressing table when he entered. She was intent with her makeup, and for that he was glad. It gave her no time to study his face.

"I went out for a breath of air," he said. "I'll go on out front. I'll be watching, darling. Good luck!"

RICK sat at a table with Mickey Livingston that night, an untouched drink before him, a twitching in his hands, three feathers and a scrap of paper burning in his coat pocket until it seemed they would leave a scar on the flesh.

He looked at the hands of his watch. Three minutes to go. He was laboring for breath. One minute. He felt a frantic, terrifying urge to throw the feathers and paper before Mickey Livingston and plead that it wouldn't go on. No matter how silly it might sound, it would relieve . . .

The lights went down with a suddenness that caused Rick to catch his breath. A hush came over the Hobgoblin. During those seconds, life in the place was frozen, and then a drum began to mutter.

For a long time there was only that, the soft patter of fingers against a single drumskin. Then another drum joined, and another. The drums and the white fingers were lighted, but the men far back on the band dais were in darkness, dressed in black.

A single dark blue light came to life overhead, casting a slim, probing beam. Slowly the light searched while the drums insistently picked up their tempo. When the moment became unendurable, the light found Vasha's face.

Rick trembled at the sight of her loveliness. He watched as she began to move, as she slipped into the tempo of the drums.

The drum beat was like hammers

against his temples. She was approaching the climax of the dance, whirling in the center of the floor, faster and faster, letting the drums lead her on, until she was a gyrating blur in Rick's eyes. The whole of the Hobgoblin felt alive with the power and speed of the dance. Near Rick a woman began to mumble meaningless vowels of rapt terror that came from her without her knowledge.

Higher and higher went the beat of the drums. Then the crash of the climax—and in the midst of it a woman screamed.

The sound brought the drums to a halt, brought Vasha up like a statue. Mickey Livingston was on his feet, hissing at a nearby waiter, "Lights, you fool!"

Mickey headed toward the spot, five tables away, where the commotion was occurring. The lights flashed on. Rick stood, staring at the scene. It was like a hard jolt in the stomach. A woman over there was pressed back hard in her chair, staring at the man slumped on the table before her. He was an old man, with silvery hair and bloated face. A gay old dog, Rick thought crazily. But not any longer. There was a laxness in the old face that spoke of death. . . .

Rick shouldered through the crowd, reached Vasha's side. He caught her trembling arm.

"Darling, what is it?"

He didn't answer. He led her back to her dressing room, lighted a cigarette, thrust it in her lips and lighted one for himself. She voiced her question again.

"I'm not sure just what happened," he said. "Mickey will probably come back here in a few minutes."

They lapsed into an uneasy silence until Mickey opened the door.

"It's okay, kids," Mickey said, wiping his face with a white silk handkerchief. "I repeat—everything is all right. But I've reported it to the police. And I guess we'll have to talk to them."

"Police?" Vasha said in a thin whisper.

"A guy who should have stayed home didn't," Mickey said.

"A man died?" Vasha turned away from them. Her voice was almost inaudible. "Somehow I knew that something awful was happening. When that woman screamed I had the feeling that something I had been waiting for had happened."

RICK gripped her shoulders hard, turned her to him. He forced a firmness into his voice. "It was the tenseness of opening. Of course you had that on-edge, expectant feeling. Don't they all have it, Mickey, when they open with something new?"


"Sure, they do."

"Who was he?" Vasha said.

"His name is Major Henry Carruthers-Smythe. You might have heard of him. He's a gad-about-town, a regular old rogue. His heart, ulcers, and liver have

been acting up for years now. Twice he had attacks in New Orleans night clubs. From what his woman companion told me, his doctors had told him his days were numbered unless he retired with the chickens and went on a milk toast diet. The old rascal snorted at his doctors, told them to be damned, that a milk toast diet would be worse than death to his way of thinking. Said he intended to go out the way he had always lived. And it was bound to happen soon. I didn't know, or I would have barred from the club. He's been here every night for the past two weeks, the last one to leave when the place closed. It might have happened any of those nights, or tomorrow night, or the next. It was simply unfortunate that it happened when you opened."

Rick slipped his arms about Vasha and told her there was no reason to be afraid, no reason at all. And I'll take my advice myself, he thought. Tonight very late I'll



The illustration shows a man in a suit and hat smoking a pipe, with a sun in the background and a bird perched on a branch. The text reads: "Country Doctor", "Mild...as spring!", "The Pipe Mixture with the KINDLY disposition".

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burn the feathers and the scrap of paper in my pocket, and tomorrow the day will start off swell.

But the first thing he saw when he got out of bed the next morning was the black headline in the newspaper:

Man Dies While Dancer Makes Voodoo.

He crushed the paper in his two hands, stood there in his New Orleans apartment with the morning sun striking his face, a cold sweat breaking on his forehead.

The phone rang. The maid padded to answer it, turned to him, "For you, sir."

He took the phone from the maid's outstretched hand. "Yes?"

"Watch the newspapers in the days to come, Fandau. Watch them and you will know that my curse works, as it worked last evening."

"La Broun . . ."

"Yes, the despised servant, La Broun. But remember my words. She makes the dance of death. I will watch. I will know. I will make the juju, prepare the amulet. She will call forth the dark Thing. When she dances, one will die. You dare not stop her. Once called forth, the dark Thing and the juju cannot be broken. When she ceases to dance, the juju will turn upon her. You will watch her waste away, until her loveliness is gone like pale smoke on a windy day, until her skin hangs in folds upon her stark bones and her face is the face of a hag, old and withered—and then she will die!"

"Damn you," Rick said hoarsely. And because the words released something pent up in him, he said them again, over and over, until he was standing there mouthing a hoarse, meaningless jumble into a dead phone.

TUESDAY'S paper carried the first of the items. It told of the body of a man having been found on the waterfront. A nameless tramp, he had apparently been

in a state of intense intoxication, wandered out on a dock, fallen off, and drowned. After being stripped at the morgue, his scanty personal effects had afforded no identification, but among his effects had been a strange amulet, three small feathers tied together by a bit of black rag. The tips of the feathers had been dipped in a substance that had dried dull brown. The water had failed to remove it, and a city chemist expressed the belief that it was blood. To all appearances, the paper stated, the man belonged to a strange cult similar to those which had once flourished in the older corners of the city and in the lower bayou country.

Rick was alone in the apartment when he read the piece. He remembered: Last night Vasha danced. Vasha danced and one died.

He shook his head. Stop it! he told himself. Get a grip on yourself!

Two other similar items appeared in the papers before the week was out. An aged, homeless woman who'd died from alcoholism. A tramp found dead in the freight yards. Always it was the same. Bodies taken to the morgue. The bizarre little amulet found among their effects.

By the time the week was out, the seed had blossomed in Rick's mind. He sank into the slough of fear slowly, not aware that each passing second was trapping him more and more. And as his mind, fighting, slowly accepted what it could not at first believe, belief came easier. His defenses crumpled, and belief spread like a parasitic plant sucking life from the plant to which it clung.

At the week's end when the third body was found, he drank himself into a half-numbed state, but that was no good. That only dulled the remaining fighting capacities of his conscious mind and terror came stealing into the numbness until he wished he were sober again.

During the second week he began avoiding Vasha. His eyes were two burned

holes in his head. His mouth was taut, habitually drawn. His cheeks were sunken, and he knew he was losing weight and appetite. He knew too that she was worrying over him, that she knew something was desperately wrong, and so he avoided her.

Vaguely he was conscious of the fact that practically all New Orleans' night clubbers tried to storm the Hobgoblin whenever she danced. She was the most famous name in the city. By the third week, a radio gossip columnist hinted that a Broadway producer was very anxious to put a certain dancing sensation of New Orleans under contract.

Rick heard the words in the quiet of the apartment, and laughed. He threw back his head and rolled out the laughter until the very cackling sound of it stopped him, shaken and clammy.

He rarely saw her now; he rose early, nerves screaming in protest at facing another day, staring at his own red-rimmed, half-wild eyes, his shaking hand cutting him while he shaved. He thought of telling her. But what could he say? "Darling," he would have to say, "you must stop. You are famous, and you will be even more so, but how many deaths will it require? You must stop this dancing to fame over the helpless bodies of the dead. . . ."

She would stop. She would think him crazy, but she would do anything to regain the old Rick, to take this worry out of her own eyes. He would have to explain the whole thing. She had never seen that first amulet, the one La Broun had slipped into her dressing room in the confusion of that first night, and so the mentions the papers had made of those strange amulets found on the dead had no meaning for her. Once he had explained, she would stop dancing. But there were two things that held him back. If she believed, she would never be the same again when she knew she had been paying the piper with

installments of death. With her temperament, it would go very hard on her. And if she stopped dancing, would the juju be turned against her next as La Broun had promised?

As he walked the streets, Rick would think about it. He would look at a passerby and wonder what the person's reaction would be if he said suddenly, "I try not to believe it myself. But there are so many things we cannot explain, even a thing as simple as what causes an egg to produce a chicken. It's insane, I know, but the facts are there. She dances, and a person dies. Not every time she dances, but perhaps they don't find the body or the amulet isn't in evidence. But the record of coincidence is completely beyond all mathematical chance. So if that part of the curse works, why not the other? Why take a chance, stop her from dancing when it might cause the dark Thing to turn upon her, cause her to . . . die?"

A month after her opening, Rick heard her talking on the phone to Mickey Livingston. She was very busy these days. There were so many places to put in an appearance, so many people to see; but she was almost weeping in the phone, and Rick heard her words: "I'm so tired, Mickey. Couldn't it be called off? I feel so darned old these days. Sometimes I even wish my legs had never been strong enough to dance! Please, Mickey—I'm so tired."

Dry-throated, Rick remembered La Broun's words that night at the old plantation house: "Until you will wish you had been stricken with palsy. . . ."

He moved silently down the hall. An anger stirred in him. But what could he do? Simply wait and wait until it was all over? Whatever it was, power of suggestion, post-hypnotic influence, or curse, he had to make La Broun stop. And he had to act fast.

But first he had to find the witch, La Broun. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Lonely Wait

FOR TWO DAYS he haunted the old quarter, the market place, and children turned to stare at him, at this finely tailored stranger who wandered the littered streets with the wild look of desperation and madness in his eyes.

The afternoon of the second day, he realized how foolish it was to think of finding La Broun that way, in so many people. It was a torture for his mind to apply itself to thought these days. It scared him a little that it should take him so long to arrive at what should have been an obvious conclusion. He rose from the dark, small bar in the quarter, where he had been sitting, thinking, oblivious to the two or three patrons who covertly stared at him now and then. On the sidewalk, his decision had been reached. Not the police. There was no charge he could level against La Broun. One couldn't swear out a warrant to cease and desist from juju.

A private detective. A discreet, wily private detective.

His name was George Boudreau. He was a beefy, red-faced man with tufts of sandy hair growing out of his ears. He grunted softly when he rose behind his desk to shake Rick's hand. He had sleepy-looking grey eyes half hidden under drooping lids.

Rick sat down, twisting the brim of his Panama in his hands, casting a glance about the sparsely furnished office.

"You don't know exactly how to begin, do you?" George Boudreau said.

"No."

"Just relax. Cigarette?"

"Thanks. I want you to find a woman for me. Not a young woman, an old woman, so incredibly evil that words would never describe it." He took a breath. "You might start with the employment

agencies. I think she works sometimes as a domestic. Or if you know the out-of-the-way places where people practice strange things . . ." He paused, trying to penetrate the shield of Boudreau's eyes, to fathom what the man was thinking.

"Such as?"

"Voodoo."

Boudreau didn't laugh. He rose, walked to the window, looked down upon the rather shoddy street where his office was located. "Filthy," he murmured. "All of them, evil in their thoughts. Science will never cure crime or evil—the cure is only in people's minds. Until they effect the cure, they'll get exactly what . . ." He turned abruptly back toward the desk. "You'll have to excuse me, Mr. Fandau. I read a lot in my idle time, and most of my time is idle." He smoothed his soup-stained necktie, sat down at the desk. "Just what is this woman to you? You don't need to fear talking to me. I've dealt in it all. This office has been my base of operations, my inner world for twenty years, Mr. Fandau." His lidded eyes searched the office, as if finding new secrets in the cracks of the plaster. "Can you imagine that kind of waste? Twenty years. . . . This old woman's name?"

"La Broun."

"And besides being a domestic?"

"She's a voodoo priestess," Rick murmured. He watched George Boudreau for some sign of humor or disdain, saw nothing of the sort, and began to speak. When he was started, it was easy for him to acquaint Boudreau with something of the hell he'd been existing in.

When Rick finished and slumped back in the chair, there were a few grains of sweat on his face.

"I'll find her," Boudreau said. "If she's in the city, I'll find her."

Rick got up to go. Boudreau added, "The charge will be a thousand dollars."

"Now?"

"No. On delivery. I just wanted to

make sure you understand the price."

He was still sitting behind the desk as Rick went out.

FOR TWO DAYS Rick waited. The second day he phoned Boudreau's office four times without catching the man in. He paced the floor in desperation. After spilling it all to Boudreau, he had felt better, though only for a little time. Now the heart had gone out of him. He picked up the phone again, dialed. When a voice answered at the other end, he said, "Classified, please." There was the click of another phone being lifted off a receiver.

"Classified?" he asked. "Will you take an advertisement, please? I want it to run in the earliest possible edition of your paper. Here is the ad, to go in the personals column: 'La Broun. You win. What can I do? Contact me. Fandau.' Got that? Thank you."

The ad was in the paper the next day. He prowled the apartment alone, waiting. Night stole in over the city like a warm blanket pulled up from the southeast. He stood at the window and watched lights come on over the city. How many different things could be happening in those buildings and streets in any given instant!

A woman named La Broun nursing her black magic and hatred. A man named Boudreau plodding through the night, hunting her. Vasha at the Hobgoblin, and he here waiting for the phone to ring.

And in an instant, how a guy's life can change, Rick thought. That one long moment in time when we could have turned back from that old plantation house without letting curiosity kill a couple of crazy cats! What kind of world was it then, before that moment when we didn't turn back? There was sunlight and laughter and security of love. True, it was a crazy kind of marriage, a quick jump over the state line. He hadn't known her long, and he had met her in a night club, but his folks had taken it well enough after their initial shock. Sunlight—and then nightmare. . .

The phone screamed. He hurried to it. It slipped in his hands. He almost dropped it. When he got it to his ear, a voice said, "Fandau? Fandau?"

A strange, muffled, whispering voice.

"Yes. This is Fandau."

"I saw the ad in the paper."

"In the name of mercy, when can I see you? What can I do to stop this? Another of those amulets showed up in the morgue yesterday. . ."

"I'll see you at midnight. Walk from

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the sixteen hundred block to the nineteen hundred block of Canal. Turn and come back the other side. Keep that up until a man passes you and says, 'Pleasant night, Mr. Fandau.' When you reply, 'A little rough on Gulf, I hear,' he will know it's you."

A click. The line was dead.

Rick let the phone slip from his fingers. He walked back to the tall window, looked at his watch. Three minutes after eight. Until midnight. Four hours. A lot could happen in four hours.

The time stretched before him, an agony, an unendurable expanse. He drew nearer to the window. Four hours. Such a long time. If only he could sleep it away. With a catch of terror, he found himself looking almost directly down to the street five stories below. He flung himself back from the window.

He was trembling, sodden with sweat. He went into the living room, poured himself a stiff drink of rye, and set the bottle beside him.

Now it was eleven-sixteen. Only three-quarters of an hour to go. The rye bottle was almost empty, but he had never felt more sober. One more drink and he would leave, giving himself time enough to get to Canal.

A skirl of sound went through the apartment. The front door buzzer. He answered it. George Boudreau was standing outside the door. He brushed in without speaking.

Inside, he said, "I saw that ad, Mr. Fandau."

"I was so on edge I had to do something."

"Did it help?"

"She contacted me. I'm to meet her tonight at midnight."

Boudreau frowned. "When was the meeting arranged?"

"Four hours ago."

"That's a long time, Mr. Fandau. I don't think she'll be seeing you. I've been

very busy in the past four hours. I think I've cracked this thing. My car's downstairs. Let's go."

AS HE drove, Boudreau asked, "Have you ever heard of a Tino Willing?"

"No."

"A most repulsive little man. I don't think you'd like to see him."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"For one reason, because he's dead."

"For one reason? Then there is another?"

"Yes," Boudreau said slowly, "but we'll wait to go into that. We won't go into that until later. Just remember the name, Tino Willing, slight of build, quick of movement, ugly with evil—and dead. He worked in the morgue. I won't bore you with the details of the legwork, but when you first told me your story I smelled extortion. That ad you ran proves you were primed for slaughter, ready to kick in anything they asked."

"I don't understand."

Boudreau handled the car adeptly. "Have pretty rough experiences in the war?"

"Some."

"Unsettled you? Hell, I don't mean did you land in a psycho ward, but you saw things out there that must have shaken your material beliefs. Most guys did. And you were young, in love, of that high degree of intelligence that approaches the sensitive. Even if you never believed in that curse you would have paid to be free of La Broun and her evil shadow."

"Yes," Rick said, "I guess I'd have paid just to have her stop it."

"That must have been pretty obvious to her. It was extortion, pure and simple. I knew those amulets had to have some way of getting into the effects of the dead when they were stripped in the morgue. The personnel of the morgue isn't large, and it wasn't too hard to weed them out. Until I got to Tino Willing. And then a

little pure and simple shadowing—which actually isn't as simple as it sounds sometimes—and he led me to La Broun. I nailed him after that. Cornered him, led him to believe I had a lot more evidence than I had. We won't go into the methods I used. But I gave him a choice between conviction for extortion and immunity for helping me to nail La Broun."

Boudreau paused, twisted the car around a clanging street car. "An hour ago, they pulled Tino Willing out of the harbor."

"La Broun," Rick whispered.

"That's my guess. She met him for the meeting with you. He thought I was on his tail—but I've got to sleep some time. And he knew this was the payoff. If he went any further I'd have him, and yet he had La Broun to reckon with. He must have made a slip that cost him his life. I'll guess further that La Broun will still try to get her claws on the jackpot. Tell me where she was to contact you and I'll get the police on it."

"On Canal. Between the sixteen and nineteen hundred blocks." He watched as Boudreau parked the car and disappeared for a few moments into a drugstore.

"It's murder now," Boudreau said, with a kind of satisfaction, "with Tino Willing dead. Perhaps it's been murder for some time. Perhaps some of those bodies that turned up weren't simply homeless tramps destined for Potter's Field. Maybe there weren't enough tramps dying. In twenty years a man that's seen the rot I have learns . . . I'm sorry. I suppose you've heard enough already about my twenty years. Now let's go to the Hobgoblin and see your wife."

VASHA was in her dressing room when they arrived. She was still in the scanty, revealing costume she had designed for her new dance, and Rick knew she had just finished her number.

Rick closed the dressing room door. "You're okay, darling? We didn't mean to break in this way, but we had to see if you were—I mean, there is a lot I have to tell you. Darling, this is Mr. George Boudreau."

Boudreau looked at her, his eyes heavy and lidded no longer. "I'm not sure it's a pleasure."

"Boudreau!" Rick said.

"Because," Boudreau continued, "I have already met her mother."

A shocking stillness gripped the dressing room. "I—I don't understand," Rick said hoarsely. He turned to seek an answer in Vasha's face, and his heart lurched. He watched the change in her mouth, her eyes, and it was like tearing a mask away.

"La Broun," Boudreau said. "Her mother. Doesn't it explain a lot of things?"

Her finding her way to the old plantation house that night, slipping out in a way to disturb him . . . to cause him to follow . . . knowing that he would. Her exact copying of the wild dance the field hand had done that night . . . as if she had done it before, again, and again. . . . The amulet and note that night in her dressing room. . . . He had even wondered at the time how anyone could have gained entry in a corridor frequented as much as that one.

Through the wild roaring in his head, he heard Boudreau speaking: "The death of old Carruthers-Smythe that night she opened, of perfectly natural causes brought on by his own actions, played right into their hands. In the beginning it was a homeless gypsy woman and her child, wandering, penniless, starved, nursing only hatred for the plenty about them. The mother teaches the wildly beautiful young girl to dance. And a rich youngster, ready for the plucking, wandering into the cesspools of New Orleans for excitement, conceives a wild fascination for

the girl. How do you like the picture, Fandau?"

"Vasha!" Rick screamed, and there was more to it than just the sound of her name.

But when her eyes turned to him, he found a stranger, and Boudreau's droning voice was without mercy: "The really ironic part was that the dance made such a hit. But La Broun feared it might be one of those passing things. She was smart enough to know that all the rising young dancing stars don't make money. Most of them burn out quickly. She had started the other scheme. It would fix them for life. It meant security for them. She wouldn't give it up."

"But extortion!" Rick cried. "Why extortion? She could have had—"

"She could have had nothing," Boudreau's brutal voice said. "She was never really married to you. She despised you—but she was an actress, not enough to fool entirely your family and friends, but it wouldn't have taken too good an actress to have fooled you, wearing those rosy glasses as you were. Anyway, she couldn't have been married legally to you. She was already married to somebody else. To a man name Tino Willing."

Rick shrank back against the wall. He saw the savage flash of her teeth as she spun, the gun that appeared in her hand from the dressing table drawer. But the gun didn't strike a chord of fear in him. He was numb, feeling nothing, almost seeing nothing.

She reached for a coat, holding the gun on Boudreau. She opened the dressing room door, slipped through. Rick heard her feet, running.

"Come on," Boudreau said.

They reached the metal stairs that led from the rear door down the alley just as she gained the sidewalk. Tires squealed. Two men jumped out of a police car that braked at the curb.

Boudreau, Rick remembered, had called the police from a drugstore.

"That's the dame!" Boudreau yelled. Rick heard her scream, the crack of her pistol. Then the two men were dragging her into the car. Boudreau ran down the alley. Rick slumped back against the building. Boudreau was gone just long enough to say a few sentences to the men in the car. The car pulled away, and Boudreau came back.

He looked at Rick. "There is your family, other girls, and you're so damned young yet you don't know what you want. Excitement, you thought. Maybe you'll know better now. You're young enough to get over it, and there'll be girls from your own world."

"I know," Rick said. "But I hate you, Boudreau. I hate you because you're the man I happened to hire out of all New Orleans to get into this thing."

"You'd rather I had failed?"

Rick was a long time in answering. "No," he whispered finally, "I guess not. The Vasha I had never really existed, except in my own mind. But I had her. And it was perfect for a few days, a few hours. It was the kind of beauty that every man dreams of, and for those few days it was mine. I guess that's more than most men ever have, no matter how long they live. It was fine and clean and breathlessly wonderful to me, Boudreau."

"I envy you," Boudreau said quietly.

"Let me buy you a drink, Boudreau, and forget your envy. There's too much of it in the world."

"You should have lived my twenty years just past," Boudreau said. "Sure I'll have a drink with you. I'll even stand a round."

As they walked out of the alley, Rick decided that Boudreau must know how he felt. How much he dreaded going back to his apartment. Back to the appalling silence and emptiness of it. . . .



There was a strange look in his eyes, and he came toward her, his big hands slowly reaching out.

HOUSE OF TERROR

By CHARLES LARSON

In the hall outside her door a slipper scuffed . . . sounding loud in the night. She could scream, Ellen knew—but to what avail? For who in this household of the mad would help her?

FLAT on her back she lay, exactly in the middle of the bed, staring at the ceiling. It was a warm night, but she hadn't thrown back any of the hot woolen blankets covering her. They seemed to give her an odd, childish sense of security, as though any time she wished, she could slip deep into them and pull them over her head . . . and be safe. . . .

Downstairs, the clock over the fireplace chimed, slowly and with great dignity, twelve o'clock.

On the ceiling over her head, shadows waved and quivered. A breeze was coming up.

Maybe it would rain, she thought. Rain would clear the air. Maybe . . .

Her mind, dull and heavy with lack of

sleep, considered the idea lazily. Rain. Dripping sluggishly down windows, overflowing rain barrels, swelling over the tops of black wooden tubs into white tubs, glistening and slippery. So many accidents happen in bathtubs. Again and again she had told the empty-faced policeman, "We warned her!" Crying, she had said, "Mr. Lawrence and I both told her to use the shower. We said bathtubs were dangerous. You remember that, Cliff? How both of us mentioned it. . . ."

* * *

It was their wedding anniversary. One year.

She giggled when Cliff kissed the back of her neck before he raised the coat he'd bought her to her shoulders. "Darling," she said, "has it seemed like a year to you?"

"Like five minutes."

"I'm glad I married a novelist. They say such nice things to their wives. Don't you think so?"

"Not to all their wives. Just their favorites. And for the dozenth time, Ellen, my sweet, I am a biographer, not—"

"I know. I know. I was joking." She turned and kissed him quickly. "I'm still the favorite?"

He hesitated, his dark eyebrows raised. "There is a redhead in Weehauken, as it happens. . . ."

"Ah." She reached up, tweaked his nose.

Slowly he dropped his hands, and slowly he pushed his head forward, menacingly. "Oh-ho," he said, "it's come to this. . . ."

She stepped backward. "Now, Cliff. . . . Cliff. . . ."

He stalked her carefully around the room, muttering under his breath, and she laughed in little gasps and swore that she wouldn't do it again. Somehow she managed to work herself into a corner of

the bedroom, between the bed and the dresser, and she stood there with her arms in front of her, still laughing, and begging him not to do whatever he was planning.

But he didn't stop. He came on and on, and finally his hands were brushing her arms aside and, one after the other, fastening on her throat.

"Cliff. . . ." She twisted her head.

He paid no attention. It might have been the light—it was the light, of course—but his eyes weren't friendly and acting any more. They were dark and much larger than they had been.

GENTLY the fingers tightened, the two thumbs pressed deep against her windpipe. It wasn't fun now. She couldn't laugh. Wonderingly she said, "Darling. . . ." Then, frightened, "Cliff!" She brought her hands up quickly, clasped her husband's wrists. "Cliff, please. Wait. . . ."

Behind them, at the door, a girl's voice said, "Oh, I'm sorry. I knocked, but. . . . I. . . ."

It was over. For a moment longer Cliff held his hands on her throat, but from the moment the maid had said her first word, the tension and squeezing in them had stopped. He said over his shoulder, "You know, when we didn't answer your knock it may have meant that we wanted to be alone. What do you think?" His voice was high and tight. He let his hands fall to his sides and turned to the door. "What is it?"

The maid wasn't pretty. Cute, perhaps. She was nineteen, and her black hair fell behind her ears to her shoulders. Her name was Shannon. She said, "Mr. Lee told me to tell you he didn't think he'd go. He said it wouldn't be right, on your anniversary."

"Oh, my goodness," Ellen said. She glanced at the watch on her slim wrist. It was impossible for her to see the time through the wetness in her eyes, but she

said anyway, "We'll be late. And you know they say that show is funniest in the first act. Come on, darling."

She caught one of his big hands and pulled him to the door. Respectfully, Shannon stood back. But before they were into the hall, Cliff stopped. "Shannon," he said, "what are you doing tonight? I'm sorry I spoke . . . the way I did. But you should have waited. You may go out if you wish. Mr. Lee will be here."

"No, sir," Shannon murmured. "I'll just stay in, sir. I'll read and take a hot bath and go to bed."

To make conversation, Ellen said, "Really, a shower would be better, dear. So many people get hurt in tubs. They slip."

"I won't slip, ma'am." She nodded her head and moved along the hall toward her own room.

"Now you've hurt her," Ellen whispered.

"What did I say?"

"Never mind. We're late. We'd better go."

They moved down the hall to the stairs, not speaking. Naturally it had been a mistake, Ellen thought. He was big, and stronger than he thought. He hadn't realized. . . .

Still, deep inside her, the fear had started. Like a cancer. . . .

They met Uncle Paul Lee downstairs,

playing checkers with his too-tall, too-thin son, Claude. Uncle Paul was round and greying and imbued with that wonderful sense of peace that comes with living with rich relatives, or about-to-be-rich relatives. He glanced up at them when they came into the living room, and smiled. "Never play games with Claude," he said. "He's much too good."

Claude laughed the quick laugh of the almost insane and bent closer to the board, one long finger poised over a black checker.

"You're the red, Claude," Uncle Paul said softly.

The long finger hesitated, then moved over a red checker.

"You're not coming with us?" Ellen asked.

"On your anniversary?" Uncle Paul looked up.

"I wish you'd come along."

Smiling, Uncle Paul was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Had a fight?"

Ellen reddened. The old man had reached the age where embarrassing questions are part of the conversation. He guessed things about her and Cliff almost before they happened. Like the other morning, at breakfast, when he'd said, "When am I to have a nephew? After all, Ellen, it's been a year now. . . ."

She hadn't meant to tell him. She had wanted Cliff to know first, but the question had upset her. "One of these days,

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Uncle Paul," she'd said, half angry.

Now she murmured in confusion, "Not a fight, really."

Uncle Paul was diplomatically silent again.

After a century or so of the quiet, Cliff cleared his throat, and said, "We'll be late. Good-night, Paul."

"Have a good time."

"Yes." They walked to the door.

"Good-night!" he called after them.

The front door closed softly on the words.

OUTSIDE, the car was waiting. It was big and black and as expensive to run as it looked. John Higgins, the tiny, spider-slim chauffeur who doubled in gardening when spring came, hopped out briskly, trying to show that he hadn't been sleeping, and thereby proving beyond a doubt that he had.

When they had climbed into the broad back seat, Higgins slammed the door shut and walked around to the front. They shouldn't have had the car, really; it cost much too much. Ellen hadn't wanted it at all, but two months before her last, most terrible stroke, Mrs. Lawrence, Cliff's mother, had said, "I have a present for you two," and had shown them the car. When they'd protested, she'd laughed and told them that she would pay if they got into difficulties, and that after she was dead all her money (and the Lawrence holdings were tremendous) would go to them anyway, so for heaven's sake . . .

They took the car.

But then the stroke had come, and in the rush of last wills and final decisions, no one thought to provide for it. She still lived, Cliff's mother, and yet it wasn't living. And more and more money went to pay for gasoline, and for oil, and for general upkeep. . . .

The motor cleared its throat under Higgins' foot and then settled to a steady,

martyred mumbling. Higgins raised himself on one hip and peered into the back seat. "The Biltmore?" he asked.

"Yes, please," Ellen said. "And hurry. We're late."

Higgins lifted a gloved hand to his cap and turned back.

In the rear neither of the Lawrences spoke.

Ellen, looking nonchalantly out of the window, and not seeing the passing street at all, wondered why Cliff was silent. After all, it was his place to speak. She knew he hadn't meant to hurt her. Maybe he didn't know he had. Maybe she'd better . . .

She turned suddenly, and wished as suddenly that she hadn't. The look in her husband's eyes . . . the blankness . . . the deep dullness over his fine face. And because the parallel was so strong, she thought, "He looks like Claude!" For a second she didn't realize what the thought really meant. He *did* look like Claude. In the dimness of the car the resemblance was amazing, terrifying.

For the first time, then, the thought came to her that her husband might be insane.

It wasn't impossible. What was impossible about it? Claude was mad, and Claude was what? To Cliff. Second cousin? Uncle Paul was Cliff's first cousin, and Claude was Uncle Paul's son. . . .

And his work. His biographies. She'd never thought particularly about them, one way or the other, but now, after the attack in the bedroom . . .

She'd thought it was fun, at first, when people asked her what her husband did to tell them, "He writes about the lives of famous men."

And when they asked—*what* famous men, statesmen or what? it was a little thrill to reply, "Not statesmen. No. Murderers. Famous murderers."

Famous murderers. He studied them. He searched everywhere for clues tha

would reveal why they had killed, and how they had killed, and their states of mind during the actual murder. He ate, slept, talked, lived nothing else. Was it fantastic to suppose that his mind had become so warped on the subject that he would kill, too, in order to get the right sensation down on his important papers? Perhaps, even, he'd been studying the life of a strangler. Perhaps . . .

"Cliff," she said suddenly, "who are you working on now?"

He turned his head slowly. "What?"

"Who are you working on now? Whose life? For your book."

"Oh." He looked out the window.

"George Joseph Smith," he said softly.

"Smith? And he was . . . I mean, did he . . . strangle his victims?"

His laughter was good to hear. "Smith?" he said, "No. Nothing so crude. The man was an artist. Strangling was much too ordinary. Why?"

She was suddenly relieved. "Nothing," she said. "Just . . . keeping up with my husband's work."

Still, the fear didn't leave. It stayed coiled around her heart, as her husband's hands had been around her throat, like a great fat snake around a warm stone. . . .

THE PLAY was really funny. They hadn't missed a great deal. Just the first few unimportant, introductory lines.

At the first intermission, Cliff sighed and slapped his knees and said, "Smoke?"

"No. You go ahead. I'll wait for you here. I'm a little tired."

He got up and excused himself down the line of slowly rising people, and she thought, unreasonably, "Before we were married, he would have coaxed me."

But in back of her just then, a bald-headed man leaned forward, and tapped her shoulder, and when she turned, nodded with his grey eyebrows at a fat woman and her smiling husband who were sitting in the next row back. They were bridge-

club acquaintances, and Ellen opened her mouth and waved and made the usual, stupidly pleased grimaces that people make at other people in theaters. It took her mind off her husband. So much that she hardly noticed his empty seat when the house lights dimmed.

But she *did* notice when the second act started, and got under way, and finished at last without him.

She was very quiet when he finally came back. The second act intermission was nearly over.

Neither of them mentioned his absence.

* * *

The drive home was not pleasant. In the car the atmosphere was like the sea seconds before a depth bomb explodes. Thick, lethargic. Waiting for something to happen.

Once she said, "You missed the second act."

"No," he said. "I saw it from the back. The lights had gone off, and I didn't want to bother everyone by plowing through to my seat."

That was all. No begging her pardon. No frantic explanations. *Take it or leave it*, his tone said.

Outwardly, she took it. . . .

When they were at the corner of their block, Ellen first noticed the blazing lights and the snarl of traffic down the street in front of their house, and she sat up straight in the seat. "Cliff!" she said. Her first thought was fire, but there were no engines, no redness in the sky.

Then it was Claude. He'd cut himself, or he'd fallen down the basement stairs. She leaned forward tensely. "Higgins, hurry," she said. "Something may have happened to Claude."

They came to a stop three houses down from their own, as close as they could get under the circumstances, and Ellen was out before Higgins could open the door.

She didn't wait for her husband. She half ran, half walked across the lawns to their home, and she was almost in the front door before the policeman there could stop her.

"Let go of me!" she said fiercely. "I live here. What's happened?"

The policeman didn't answer. He leaned inside the door and shouted, "Mr. Lee?"

In a moment Uncle Paul came running up to them. His grey hair was stuck wildly out over his head, and his clothes were loose on him, as though he hadn't had time to get entirely into them.

"Uncle Paul," Ellen said, "what happened? Tell me. This idiot won't." She was almost crying. Claude had been insane, but Uncle Paul had loved him. . . .

But then, in back of Uncle Paul, Claude appeared. And because she'd been expecting so much that Claude was dead, she hardly heard what Uncle Paul was saying.

But Higgins heard.

He and Cliff had come up behind them, and Cliff was talking to the policeman who was holding Ellen.

"Shannon!" Higgins said. "Shannon? What do you mean, Shannon's dead? Good Lord, Mr. Lee, you—you . . ." His voice broke, and, in a way, it was ridiculous to see the ugly little man cry. "Shannon," Ellen whispered.

" . . . terrible accident," Uncle Paul was saying. "She must have fallen while she was getting into the bathtub. She was dead when we found her."

Ellen was crying now, too. She turned to the empty-faced policeman holding her arm. "We warned her!" she said. "Mr. Lawrence and I both told her to use the shower. We said bathtubs were dangerous. You remember that, Cliff? How both of us mentioned it. . . ."

SHE WAS sitting straight up in bed. The same shadow quivered on the ceiling, but it was cooler than it had been,

and much later. For a moment she was too awake to think coherently. She could only sense, and the sense was fear, deep, primitive, complete.

Then the night and the chilliness began to creep into her awareness, and she sank slowly down once more onto the bed. It was only a dream, she told herself, that had awakened her. No sound. No unusual noise. Just the dream about Shannon. It was odd she'd dreamed about the little maid. In point of fact, *her* death had been the least nightmarish of all. Was Shannon the first? Yes, because Higgins had felt so bad. He'd been alive then. It had been a night like this that they'd found him. Later, perhaps. Almost dawn. The black of night had gone, but it had still not become light. Just minutes before morning. . . .

Her mind drifted softly back, and back, and it seemed that she could hear again the odd, thrashing sound. . . .

She didn't want to remember, heaven knows, but it was hard not to, and she was so tired that she couldn't fight the memories that crowded in on her. . . .

* * *

Minutes before morning. In the east, icy dawn had begun to streak like pale blood over the hills. The outline of Higgins' tiny house in back was barely discernible, but she was sure she'd seen someone run from its front door, to disappear into the shadows. She had held her robe tightly about her and said, "Higgins?" The floor was cold to her bare feet, she should have stepped into her slippers before coming to the window. Thoughtless.

There was no answer from the small house, and she felt a quick strike of pain in her heart. Since Shannon's death, pronounced accidental by the police, it was as though she'd been waiting for something more to happen.

Cliff had changed so. They never joked with each other, never had those wonderful mock battles that people who've only been married a little over a year ought to have. He seemed to be afraid of hurting her. . . .

Suddenly she turned and made her way across the room to the door. She would go to him—he slept in his den when he was working—and tell him she was frightened, and together they would see about Higgins. Perhaps that was what had been so wrong. He'd felt that she didn't trust him. If she asked for his protection, told him something had frightened her . . .

But when she reached it, his den was empty.

She closed the door softly behind her and stood against it, watching the splash of light the desk lamp made on his typewriter. The cot at the side of the room hadn't been slept in at all.

After a moment she walked to the desk. She had never been curious about his work, but now, for some reason, she wanted desperately to see what he did.

He was, she noticed, writing about a Russian who'd killed his victims by hanging them. Lev Kuragin. A student at the Sorbonne, he'd murdered twenty persons and had supported himself in school on what he'd robbed from the bodies.

She had finished the notes on Kuragin and was looking over some on Lizzie Borden when Uncle Paul came in. He

came in so quickly, with a little bounce and a face so white, that she was barely able to hold back the scream that trembled on the edge of her teeth.

"Uncle Paul!" she said. "For heaven's sake—"

"Did I frighten you? I'm so sorry." He was excited, and his upper plate kept slipping down. "Something around here is wrong, Ellen," he said. "Noises. Noises from the back. And I can't find anybody. Claude isn't in his room, and now Clifford . . ." He looked at her closely. "I'm going to see what it is. Ever since Shannon I've been . . . You stay here. I'll . . ."

His teeth were slipping badly.

"I'm to stay *here*? Alone?" Ellen laughed shakily. "Good Lord, Uncle Paul, do you think for a minute . . ." She paused, and then took his arm with determination. "Come on," she said.

The grass was cold and wet, and morning was already seeping into the air when they reached the house. There was one light burning inside, and there were two slouching forms outside. One was Claude. The other turned as she and Uncle Paul came up. "Ellen!" Cliff said.

She ran to him, put her arms about his waist. "Darling," she said, "what is all this? I heard a noise from out here, and then Uncle Paul came along. Has someone tried to rob Higgins?"

"No," Cliff said.

Ellen hesitated for what seemed an

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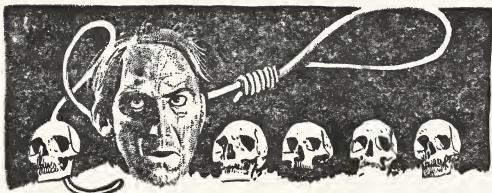


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He had written about Smith, and Shannon had been drowned . . . and he had written about Kuragin, and Higgins had been hanged. Coincidence? Ellen wondered.

age. Then very slowly she raised her head. "No?" she repeated.

Cliff looked old. "Listen, Ellen," he murmured.

But she wasn't listening. She didn't need to. She could see, now, the shadow the burning light inside Higgins' house threw on the open door. Gently swinging. Grotesquely bowing its shadow's head to them. And she could see the thick knot that rested just under its ear, and the long, lazily spiraling rope that led to a creaking rafter. Someone had hanged Higgins.

She didn't scream or faint.

But her arms dropped slowly to her sides, and she stepped back a little. "Higgins dead?" she whispered. "Not . . . not Higgins . . ."

"Yes. He—he killed himself. Suicide. Probably it—"

"Cliff," she interrupted softly.

"Yes?"

"Who was George Joseph Smith?"

"What?"

"Who was he? Tell me." Her voice had become sharp, urgent.

"Why . . ." Cliff reached into his pocket for a pack of cigarettes, pulled one out, and stuck it in his mouth. "He was a mass-murderer. An Englishman."

"I know. But *how* did he kill . . . whoever he killed?"

"Ellen . . ."

"How, Cliff?"

He was silent while he set a match to the end of his cigarette. Then he shrugged quickly. "All right," he said. "You'll find out anyway." He drew a deep breath. "He drowned them," he said. "In their baths."

The world reeled slowly, and in her mind it seemed she could hear only the wail of a note held too long on a violin. He'd written about Smith, and Shannon had been drowned; he'd written about Kuragin and Higgins had been hanged. Coincidence?

Only dimly was she aware of him calling to her, as she turned and made her way blindly back to the house.

Like father, she thought, choking. Like father, like father . . . and in her mind was only one thought—to get away, far away, and to hope and pray that this son she would have, this wonderful son . . . would be born dead. . . .

THAT night she locked herself in her room while she packed. All day the police had been there, and they'd established almost beyond a doubt that it was suicide. If it wasn't suicide, they said, it was the cleverest murder in years. She'd thought. *Of course. The cleverest since Kuragin.*

At ten o'clock she'd gone to bed. But

not to sleep. Who could have slept? She heard noises where there were none; she woke trembling when the blanket touched her chin in a place it had missed before.

A thousand times she told herself there was nothing to worry about, but always the thought of George Joseph Smith and of Lev Kuragin pushed itself into her mind. And later, the name "Lizzie Borden." He'd been starting Lizzie Borden's life. Who was she? Wasn't there a verse . . .

Lizzie Borden took an axe,
And gave her father forty whacks;
And when she saw what she had done,
She gave her mother forty-one.

Something like that. She'd shuddered and tried again to sleep.

But . . .

"Lizza Borden took an axe . . . Lizzie Borden took an axe . . ." No use. No sleep. Maybe it was better. So she'd opened her eyes wide and reconciled herself to not sleeping. And so she'd slept.

It was past two when she heard the noise.

She was turning over, trying to find a cool spot on her pillow, and she thought at first it was only the bed-springs. But bed-springs don't sound much like a slipper scuffing, and that was the noise.

A slipper scuffing.

She lay very still, listening, and her whole body seemed rigid, as though some medieval magician had turned it into steel. She wanted to get up, but it was so hard to move. . . .

Slowly she raised herself in the bed, her wide eyes watching as light from a street lamp outside her window caught at the brass doorknob and flashed dully when the knob turned.

There was no sound for a long time when whoever was there found that the door was locked, and then the quiet rattle of a pass-key edged into the stillness.

Again she could hear the singing in

her ears, high and shrill, like a note held too long on a violin. Perhaps, she thought madly, it wasn't Cliff. Maybe it was only a burglar. Only a burglar.

But it was Cliff. His hand on the door. His white face looking in at her. Cliff, come to kill her.

The shrill violin note in her ears stopped abruptly, and in the dead silence she screamed.

Again and again. Screams that poured over her lips and made her throat ache with their swelling. She put her shaking hands over her face and bent her upper body over her knees and screamed with fright into the bedcovers. And when she felt her husband's hands on her hair, she was too tired and too terrified to do anything more.

She waited, crying, and waited . . . and waited.

And nothing happened.

Only the hand stroked her head, very softly, very gently.

The trembling stopped first at her shoulders, and then her breast, and stomach, and legs.

"Ellen," Cliff murmured.

Slowly she raised her head. And Cliff leaned down and kissed her very softly on the tip of her nose.

Foolishly she said, "What about the axe?"

"Axe?"

"Axe," she said, "Axe. Axe. Axe." She leaned against him, her face pressed against his shirt. "Oh, God . . . dear God . . ."

And from the doorway, Uncle Paul Lee said, "Oh, Ellen . . . that axe you mentioned . . ."

She took her head away from her husband's shirt. "What?" she asked dully. Cliff rose slowly, faced the door. "Paul," he said.

"Get away, Clifford." The light from the street lamp outside reflected another color now. Steel. Cold. Sharp.

"Uncle Paul," Ellen said, "I—I don't—"

"Don't you, dear?" The floor squeaked as the old man came closer. "Clifford, will you get away from her? You're in the way."

"Uncle Paul! You!" Cliff whispered wonderingly.

"Me."

"I've been stupid as *hell*."

"Haven't you, though?"

"I . . . thought at first that . . . maybe Claude . . ."

"Claude helped me with Shannon." Uncle Paul smiled a little. "The other was my own."

Cliff rubbed his forehead. "I was afraid . . ."

"That you were losing your mind. I hoped you would. I hoped Ellen would. Now get away from her."

"But, Paul . . . why? In the name of heaven, why all these . . ."

Uncle Paul stopped, the axe held loosely in his hands, at the foot of the bed. "I didn't want to have to kill Ellen, too. I thought she might get a divorce before the baby comes, afraid of insanity, you know, but wh—"

"Baby! Cliff stared at his wife.

"Baby yes. But I'm afraid now that she still loves you. I'm afraid there wouldn't be a divorce. I'm afraid there'd be a direct heir for your mother to spend her ridiculous amount of money on. Now . . ." He shrugged. "Afterwards, you, of course, will commit suicide because of your fear of insanity, and since Claude and I will be the last remaining members of an unhappy family . . ."

"I'll be damned," Cliff murmured. "I must have been unconscious."

"Cliff!" Ellen screamed suddenly. "Cliff!"

Uncle Paul had raised the axe. "Will you get away, Clifford?" he asked. He moved around the bed.

CLIFF stood still. In the night his teeth were very white as he smiled. "Get away?" he said. "Paul, you're madder than Claude. Leave my son?" Slowly he walked forward, toward his cousin. "An axe is unwieldy as the devil. You never should—"

Light glittered as Paul turned the flat of the blade toward him, and swung viciously. It caught Cliff high on the chest, and he fell like a poled ox. But almost before he was on the floor, his hands, the rough hands that Ellen had feared so much, were wrapping themselves around Uncle Paul's legs and pulling. Screaming, the old man fell.

Still grinning, Cliff dove on top of him, and one hand found his neck. Feebly Uncle Paul turned the axe blade upward, and tried to roll the man on top of him onto it. But deeper and deeper Cliff's fingers pressed, and slowly the old man relaxed.

It seemed hours before he stopped struggling altogether; it was actually seconds.

Silently, Cliff rose. For a long time he stood over Uncle Paul. Then he turned slowly and went back to the bed.

"Dead?" Ellen asked very softly. "Is he dead?"

"Not dead. Unconscious, until we can call the police. I could have killed him. Jiu-jitsu, an old Japanese murder method. He was at a disadvantage, because he'd marked me for suicide. It wouldn't have looked too well for me to have been bit up by an axe."

He paused a moment and then sat down on the edge of the bed. Again he leaned over, and again he kissed the tip of Ellen's nose very softly. "Darling," he said. Just that.

Slowly, Ellen felt her body relax. The long nightmare was over, and soon dawn would once again bathe the house in golden light!



By
DAY
KEENE

He emptied the gun at me, and the slugs smacked into the wood paneling of the office.

BEYOND the GREEN DOOR

He hoped that Montana Wilson was right about those pearly gates and St. Peter and all that. Oh, how he hoped it! Because, otherwise, he didn't see how he'd be able to move his dragging feet through the little green door that led—to what?

THE WEATHER was good up to the big night, but that night it stormed fierce. There was rain and lightning and even thunder. Every once in a while I could hear a sharp *co-rack*. Then there would be a low rumble.

I didn't feel so good. They told me I could have anything I wanted to eat, so I

ordered French-fried potatoes, a steak, and pie a la mode. But when it came I couldn't eat it, so I asked the guard to give it to Montana. His real name was Sam Wilson, but everyone called him Montana because he had been born there, and he was my best friend in the death house.

He wanted to know how I felt. I told him I didn't feel so hot, and he said, "Don't let it get you, Harry. You made a bad mistake. But now you are sorry for what you done. He ain't going to hold your mistake against you."

I said I hoped he was right and lit a fresh cigarette off of the one I was smoking. I was going to miss Montana. He never talked dirty like the other guys or boasted about the bad things he had done. And even if he was black and I was white we got along just fine, and I was glad to have him for my friend.

I asked him to tell me again what it was going to be like.

His mouth full of steak, he told me, "First there is going to be a flash, just like one of them flashes up there in the sky. But it ain't going to hurt you none. And when you open your eyes the first thing you going to see is a pair of big pearly gates leading into a golden city where everyone is singing and laughing and making music and having themselves a time."

He sounded like he believed it. I tried to, hard.

"But you ain't going to get in right away," Montana said. "Because right smack in the middle of them pearly gates you going to see old Saint Peter with a long white beard down to here and a copy of your record in his hand. 'Harry Johnson,' he's going to tell you, 'I like your looks. You look like a clean-cut boy to me. But nummmm. It says here you got in some mighty bad company. And we going to have to get this straightened out before I can let you in. You willing to work hard to prove you can be trusted?'"

I said I was, and Montana chuckled.

"Yes, sir. That's just what you going to tell him, boy. And after that they ain't going to hold your record against you. No, sir. They going to send you to a school and give you ten lessons to learn. And then when you've got them down good so you can repeat them forwards and backwards like a G.I. knows his general orders, they going to put you to work around the outside of the place doing a little of this and that until they find out if you really on the up-and-up.

"You'll probably start off with the black gang, shoveling coal to make all the heat for the volcanoes and the hot springs and the sun. Next they'll give you a broom and a bucket full of star dust and see how clean can you sweep the landing space in front of the gate. Or you may catch a night shift and have to hang out the stars, or roll the rain clouds around the sky. And all the time you working, the old devil is going to be tempting you with wine and pretty girls and maybe a deck of cyards or a pair of dice. But you ain't going to be tempted. You've learned your lesson, son. And you going to keep your mind on what you've been set to do. And then one night or morning when you come off shift, there going to be Saint Peter again. And he going to say, 'I knew you had it in you all the time, Harry. Walk in, son. Walk right in through the pearly gate and pleasure yourself in any way you like.'"

IT SOUNDED pretty good to me, and I felt a whole lot better about what was going to happen, until Finlay in Number 6 screamed:

"The man is out of his mind. He's crazy. It ain't like that at all. We're all going to roast in flame through all eternity with a million little devils sticking pitchforks in our hides."

Montana asked him how he knew. "You ever die before?"

"*Sí, señor,*" Manuel answered for him. "Each night and each morning I 'ave died

since I 'ave been in thees place. I 'ave also been in both hell and heaven many times. But they are not as either of you *señores* describe. Both are right here on earth, and they are both bounded by a woman's arms." He plucked at his guitar. "No, no. Breathe deeply while you may, *señores*. When you are dead you are dead, and your body is of no concern to anyone but the *director funerario* and the worms."

Montana told him to shut up. I was glad I hadn't tried to eat the steak. I sat on the edge of my bunk looking out at the streaks of lightning crackling across the sky, hoping Mr. Gleason wouldn't bring Sally with him when he came to say good-bye, and yet hoping that he might.

From time to time the lights in the cell block dimmed as a bolt of lightning struck a power wire or transformer or whatever it was it struck to make the lights dim down. The guard joked that it looked like I might get a reprieve after all. But the lights never stayed down long.

At nine o'clock the deputy warden came in and read me a long legal something he said he was required to read by law. I asked him if he thought I might get a last-minute reprieve.

He told me there wasn't a chance. "We're keeping a wire open just in case. But the Governor gave a statement to the papers this afternoon in which he said he wouldn't interfere unless the trial judge or the D.A. asked him to."

I said that would seem to be that. I hadn't meant to kill Lieutenant Shives. I wasn't certain I had. But I had been at the roadhouse. I had been high as a kite. I was supposed to protect Maxie. A ballistics expert had proven the slug had come from my gun.

It was almost ten when the screw brought in Mr. Gleason and Sally. He did a lot of talking about how he thought I had got a raw deal and how he had done his best to get the Governor to commute my sentence to life because I was so young. But neither Sally or me said much. We just sat on my bunk and held hands and once in a while I kissed her or she kissed me.

Then they were gone, and it was eleven o'clock, and the barber had shaved a patch on my head, and Montana was singing a song about a place called Jordan and a sweet chariot that was coming to carry him home. It was a kind of religious song and I liked it very much, but it was getting harder and harder for me to breathe. I wanted to bang my fists on something and scream. And I guess the warden knew how I felt. He didn't look too good himself, and when he came in with Father Schaeffer to tell me I had a half-hour to go he slipped a pint under my pillow. I thanked him for having been as nice as he had been to me, but I didn't open the pint.

It could be Montana was right. And I didn't want to get off on the wrong foot

women prefer men who prefer



It grooms hair - relieves dryness - removes loose dandruff!



by blowing a whiskey breath into Saint Peter's face if I did get to see him and he asked had I learned my lesson.

I did ask Father Schaeffer if there was a heaven and a hell. He said there was, and while he and Finlay agreed pretty well about what the hell was like, I liked Montana's heaven better. Father Schaeffer's was kind of cold and dignified, and I didn't think I would like it.

But he was a very good man, and I did feel a whole lot better after he had prayed for me.

Then it was time to say good-bye. I didn't want to do it, but I had to. My sentence had been I was to die in a place and time and manner as prescribed by law. And this was the place and the time was midnight.

I saved Montana for the last. Finlay was too crazy with fear to make much sense, but Manuel shook my hand after I had given him half of the cigarettes I had left.

"Go with God, *señor*," he told me. "It can be I am wrong. I sincerely hope I am. So, in that case we will not say a *Diós* but *hasta la vista, señor*."

One of the guards said, "That means until we meet again."

I told him back, "Until we meet again." Then I shook hands with the other guys and stopped to say a last good-bye to Montana.

His face was more gray than black, and his knuckles were white from gripping at the bars. "So-long, Harry," he said quietly. "It's nice having been friends with you. And you keep your chin up, boy. You hear me? And I don't lie to you none. It's all just like I told you. I'll be seeing you in a few nights, Harry."

I gave him the rest of my cigarettes, and there was nothing left between me and the open door at the far end of the corridor. They let me set the pace. Then the four of us walked toward it slowly, the two guards, Father Schaeffer, and me. . . .

THERE had been the flash, all right, just like Montana had described it, but both he and Finlay had been wrong about the other. There weren't any pearly gates or any flame. I was standing on a rain-drenched street, and lightning and thunder were still flicking and rumbling across the sky. I got out of the rain by stepping into the doorway of a store, but when I felt in my pockets for a cigarette I hadn't any. Then I remembered. I had given all my cigarettes to Manuel and Montana.

It was funny, I thought, that after what had happened to me I would still want to smoke. But I did. Then I recognized the store. It was Ben Gold's Smart Shop. He had been down on Maxie's list for fifty dollars a month. I had collected it many a time. We had bought Sally's wedding dress at Gold's. That meant I was still in South Haven.

I stood trying to figure out the score and not making a lot of progress. I had walked into the death chamber. I had sat in the chair. The warden asked if there was anything I wanted to say. When I told him there wasn't—it happened. It was like being hit by a truck. My chest had strained against the strap while lightning flashed all around me. Then there was cold and silence. And now I was back on Front Street.

It didn't make sense to me.

A cab sloshed by, going east. Then a lad came out of Fogarty's pool room and walked slowly up the street with his head down against the rain. As he walked under the street lamp I saw it was Slim Ambler. "How's for a butt, Slim?" I asked him. "I seem to be fresh out."

He walked on by the doorway like I wasn't even there. At first I was sore. Slim and I had shot a lot of pool together. He was supposed to be my friend. And now on account of I was in a bad jam he was snooting me.

Then I realized how it was. Slim wasn't

snooting me. He didn't know I was there. *He couldn't hear or see me. I was dead.*

It made me feel very bad. I didn't want to be dead, especially in South Haven. If I had to die I wanted to go to a place like Montana had told me about. I wanted to learn the ten lessons and work hard and prove I could be trusted so they would let me inside the gate and maybe even see Sally again.

The rain wet on my face, I walked on down to the pool room and looked in the window. No one was shooting any pool. They were all standing at the bar listening to some program Fogarty had tuned in on his radio. I walked on not quite knowing where to go or what to do with myself. Being dead was very new to me. I didn't think I was going to like it.

It sure was a honey of a storm. I had never seen a worse one. There was lightning and thunder all over the place, especially in the sky. At Twelfth Street I waited for the red light to change, then laughed to myself kind of sour like. No car was going to hit me. No cop was going to arrest me for jay-walking. I was dead.

I walked on as far as Zimmerman's, then sat down on the wet bread box wondering what to do and thinking about how many times I had swept out the store and sacked beans and sugar and coffee and delivered orders for the old Dutchman after my old man had died and I had to quit the eighth grade and scratch for something to put in the pot so the younger kids wouldn't go hungry.

Old Zimmerman had been good to me. I wished I had stuck to him instead of branching out the way I had. I might even be a partner in the store. But I hadn't, and I wasn't, and there was no use thinking about it. Looking back from the bread box I could see I had made a lot of mistakes.

Throwing in with Maxie was the worst one I had made. But there was no use

sitting in the rain cutting up old touches. I had no one to blame but myself. I got up and walked on. This being dead and having nothing to do but think was going to take a lot of getting used to.

There were a few other folks on the street. Once in a while I would meet a guy or a doll and even sometimes a couple heading home from a party or a dance. But they all walked by me in the rain, not even looking my way. I had never been so lonely.

I THOUGHT about walking out to Ma's house and just looking in through the kitchen window on the chance that she still might be up. But dead or not, Ma would know I was there and probably cry, and I didn't want to make it any tougher on her than it was. The guy she was married to wasn't a bad Joe, but he didn't like me at all. He had even tried to keep Ma from coming to my trial. He had a good job as an appraiser with the Title and Trust Company, and he said it was bad enough for him to have to raise another man's kids along with his own without having one of them turn out to be a hoodlum and disgrace him. Not that he had raised me. We hadn't got on from the start, and though Ma had felt awful bad about it, he had been one of the reasons I had struck out on my own.

But Sally was another matter. She was mine. She was Mrs. Harry Johnson, with a ring and a license to prove it. And I had a right to go home.

I walked in on my tiptoes, being careful not to scare her. But I didn't need to have bothered. I didn't even drip where I was standing.

She had hung up the dress she'd had on and was sitting on our bed in her slip with her face in her hands. I thought at first she was bawling, but she wasn't. She was saying a kind of prayer she had made up by herself.

"Take care of him, God," she was pray-

ing. "Please be good to him. Harry isn't bad. Honestly he isn't. And if he did wrong he didn't mean to. He is just a kid like I am, God. And he didn't know any better. Please be good to him. Because he is good, God. And he was good to me."

I wanted to take her in my arms and tell her everything was going to be all right, like I had done the night I had promised her I would get out of the rackets. But it would have been a lie. Nothing would ever be quite right for Sally again. And, anyway, all I could do was stand there, loving her, and being proud because she felt like she did about me.

I had made up my mind to quit Maxie too late.

The little house and the kids and all the rest of the stuff Sally and I had talked about weren't ever going to be, although we had got a big bang out of even talking about them. She hadn't ever had much either. I stood there aching for her, wishing I was smarter than I was and I could figure out some way to let her know how I felt about her.

Then finally she stopped praying and just sat looking at the clock. She was watching it when the phone rang. She jumped up quick and ran to answer it. For a moment her eyes brightened. Then they went sad again.

"No. No, thank you. I am quite all right," she said coldly into the phone. "There is nothing you could do or say to help me. And I don't want to see you now—or ever."

I was still wondering who had phoned when Myra Gill who had danced with Sally at the Frolics came in from the kitchen with a cup of tea.

"Who was it phoned?" she asked.

"No one important," Sally told her. "Only Maxie."

"The nerve. The nerve of the guy," Myra said. "To hell with Maxie."

"That's what I told him," Sally sniffed.

"But I'm afraid. With Harry gone . . ."

And that was as far as she got. Putting her head on Myra's shoulder, she began to cry, and I walked back out into the rain. The fact that Maxie had been making a pitch for Sally was strictly a new angle. I wasn't pleased to hear about it. But it did explain why he had reneged on helping me pay for a mouthpiece. He had been glad to see me out of the way. And Maxie was a leech whenever a doll was concerned. He usually got them one way or another.

I automatically felt for the gun before I remembered I didn't have one. I hadn't had one for eight months. Sergeant Gibbs had taken my gun at the roadhouse the night I had my trouble with Shives.

THE RAIN was wetter and colder than it had been. I walked back past Fogarty's pool room, whistling and waving at every cab that passed me, but none of them even slowed down. Through the rain-steamed windows of the pool room I could see the boys still clustered around the radio on the bar. It must be some program, I thought.

Then I put everything else from my mind and thought about Maxie. A lot of things were clearer, now I knew how he felt about Sally. I even began to wonder about Maxie and me and Lieutenant Shives. I had nothing against the lieutenant. I had always admired the guy because he couldn't be bought. It was Sergeant Gibbs' word that had burned me.

"Johnson fired the shot. I saw him fire it," he had testified. And Sergeant Gibbs could be bought. Gibbs was as crooked as Maxie. Only he cut his cake in uniform.

I wished I had more schooling. I wished I wasn't so dumb. I wished I knew the ten lessons Montana had talked about. I had to get through somehow to Maxie. It no longer mattered to me what happened to me personal. I was willing to walk through rain and thunder and

lightning as long as the Big Guy saw fit, if I could keep Sally from being dirtied.

"Give her a break," I prayed as I passed the stone steps of Our Lady Of The Valley. "I'm not asking any favors for myself. I dished it out. I can take it. But please let things be right for Sally."

Then I was out in the open country sloshing down the highway through the night, and the storm was even wilder. Now and then a car or a truck passed me, the tread of their tires making loud sucking sounds on the wet pavement. I didn't try to flag them down. It wasn't any use. They couldn't see me.

In spite of the rain, Maxie's joint was getting a good play. The parking lot was black with cars. Forgetting for a moment, I stopped beside Jo Jo the doorman and asked him if Maxie was in his office.

Jo Jo looked tired and sort of sad. I guess he was sorry I was dead. I liked all of the boys. All of the boys liked me. But Jo Jo couldn't see me. He just sighed, shifted the toothpick in his mouth, and walked out into the rain to hold an umbrella over a good-looking doll staggering out of a Lincoln Continental.

The bar, as usual, was crowded. But Connie wasn't cracking wise. He looked as sad as Jo Jo, and all the customers were getting for their dough was drinks. Maxie wasn't in the bar and he wasn't in the dining room, so I poked my head into the kitchen before I went upstairs.

His white cap pushed back on his head, Danny was sitting on a high stool, one ear glued to a small radio tuned down so low I couldn't hear the broadcast. Bannon, one of the waiters, pushed through the swinging doors behind me. "Two filets. Medium well on one and burn the other. Anything new yet, Danny?"

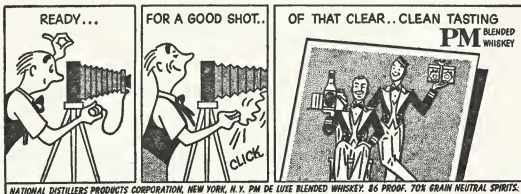
"Not yet," Danny told him. He unglued his ear reluctantly and threw two steaks on the broiler. "But it's the damndest thing I ever heard. You know, it makes a guy wonder."

"Yeah. Don't it?" Shannon said.

Whatever was on the radio had them steamed up plenty. I walked back to the stairs. Aileen was standing on the first step, puffing on a cigarette and looking over the crowd for a sucker. She was too old for such work and Sally said she had to touch up her hair, but she still looked plenty good in a strapless evening gown, and she seldom had a beef from any of the old bucks she touted upstairs to the tables. We'd always got along fine, although sometimes she said things I didn't quite understand. Like the time she told me, "The flame isn't worth the wear and tear on the candle, Harry. Get out of the sand while you can and build a nice ugly house for you and Sally on a rock."

See what I mean?

I patted her shoulder as I passed her. She touched the spot with her hand, and for a moment I was hopeful she could



see me. But she couldn't. What she said was to one of the bus boys. "Tell Jo Jo to keep that damned front door shut. I can feel the draft from here."

SAM and Morry were on the peep hole but I didn't bother to knock. I went right in and looked over the game room for Maxie. All of the tables were getting a good play but he wasn't at any of them, so I walked on across the room and into the ante room of Maxie's private office. Candy and Spike were playing double solitaire for matches. The inner office door was open, and I could see Maxie sitting at his desk scowling at a portable radio.

I walked in and closed the door. "Hello Maxie."

He jumped like he was shot. But I still wasn't getting through. It was the door slam that scared him. Mopping at his face, he got up and opened it again. "What's the idea of closing the door?" he asked Candy.

Candy looked up from his cards. "I didn't close any door. It must've been the wind. Anything new yet, Maxie?"

"Not yet," Maxie told him and went back to his desk.

I tried to reach him again. "This is Harry, Maxie. I want a little talk with you. A little talk about Sally and maybe a few other things."

He twisted the dial of his radio like he was trying to tune something out. A big man, well padded with fat, he looked to me like his supper wasn't sitting very well. His face was white. There were dark rings under his eyes. From time to time he swallowed hard like something was stuck in his throat.

From the other room, Candy said, "It can be he'll get a reprieve. That is what happened to that colored lad down in Georgia."

Maxie told him to shut up, and Candy poked his head in the door. "For God's sake what's eating on you, Maxie? You're

glad about it, all right, aren't you?"

Sweating like a pig, Maxie told him, "Yeah. Sure. Of course I am."

Aileen came in past Candy and sat on the edge of the desk. "What's new?"

"Nothing," he snapped.

She said for him not to bite her head off.

I tried a third time to get through, putting every ounce of strength I had in it. "This is Harry, Maxie. You *got* to hear me. I've walked fifteen miles in the rain to have a talk with you. I mean to have it."

His eyes bugged at something on the carpet and he screamed. I looked to see what he was staring at. I couldn't see a thing, and from the puzzled look on Aileen's face I guess she couldn't either. "You hear me. You got to hear me," I repeated.

Maxie sort of sobbed. "No. No. Go away. You can't talk and I can't hear you."

Aileen said, "The guy has gone nuts."

Now I had made contact I talked fast "Being dead isn't what you think, Maxie. It isn't what anyone thinks. It's just rain and night and thunder and lightning and being lonely. No one will look at you or talk to you. But you can see and hear everything. Just like I heard you call Sally. And keep your dirty mind off her, Maxie. She is good and she's clean and she's sweet. And she is going to stay that way."

From the doorway Candy asked what he was looking at.

"Those wet footprints," Maxie said, pointing. "Don't tell me you can't see them. *They lead from the door to that puddle right there in front of my desk.*"

I took a step closer to him, and he screamed again.

"I can't see a thing," Candy said.

"Nor I," Aileen said, puzzled.

Slobber dripping down his chin, Maxie screamed, "See? He just took another step." He shrank away from me, fumbling

in the drawer of his desk for a gun. "No. Get out. You can't touch me. I had Gibbs settle your hash when he swore you into the chair. Get out or I'll give you what I gave Shives with your gun the night you tried to quit me."

He emptied the gun at me and the slugs smacked into the wood paneling of the office. Then, in the silence that followed, Aileen got up from the desk and Spike stood in the doorway back of Candy. "What?" he asked Maxie quietly. "What was that I just heard you say?"

Maxie put his face in his hands and cried. Aileen said, "I'll get the rest of the boys," and left the office. Then all of them were there, Connie and Danny and Sam and Morry and even Shannon, and Maxie looked small and sort of shrunken, sitting in back of his desk with an empty gun in his hand.

"I—I didn't say a thing," he groaned.

Candy slipped his gun from its holster and walked slowly toward the desk. "The hell you didn't. Now get on that phone—and fast. Harry was a nice kid. . . ."

I was glad to know the boys still liked me. I liked them. And I wanted to know who Candy was going to make Maxie call. But it was getting harder and harder to hear what they were saying. I tried to stay but I couldn't. Something was pulling me back down the stairs and I was out in the rain again and I didn't feel so good. Then somebody turned off the rain and a hot sun began to burn me. I could hear myself panting for breath. Then somewhere a man said:

"It isn't fair. I don't care how the law reads. He took his medicine once. He took it like a man. And it isn't human to put him through that again."

I DIDN'T want to. But I did. I opened my eyes. And I hadn't gone anywhere. The sun was a big hanging light. I was lying on a metal stretcher with wheels in

the little room off the death chamber. The man who was talking was the warden. I couldn't see the man he was talking to, but Doctor Meyers was standing by my side.

"It's over, isn't it?" I asked him.

He wiped the sweat from my face with a towel. "I'm sorry, son. But something went wrong with the chair. And it's all to be gone through again."

I thought for a minute that I couldn't take it. But I did. All I said was, "Oh." I wanted to say a lot more. I wanted to tell them where I had been and how I knew I hadn't shot Lieutenant Shives. But none of them would have believed me. So I just asked for a cigarette.

He lighted one and put it between my lips. I lay smoking and thinking of Sally and how Montana was a liar and there wasn't a Big Guy after all or he wouldn't let such things happen like it only having been a dream that I had got through to Maxie.

Then the deputy warden came in all out of breath like he had been running. "Hold everything," he said. "The D. A. is on the phone. It seems Maxie Cooper couldn't take the strain of the chair shorting when we put Johnson in it, and he has just babbled a full confession that he and not Johnson killed Shives." He touched the shoulder of the man who had been talking to the warden, and when he turned I saw it was Gibbs. "You had better come with us, Sergeant," he told him. "It would seem the D. A. would like to talk to you, too."

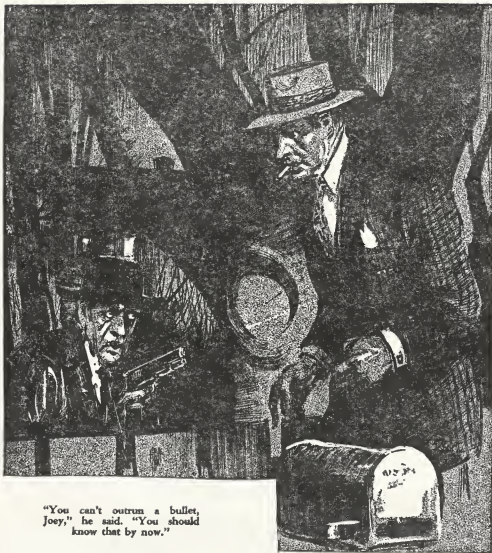
I thought Gibbs was going to faint. Then they all started out of the room and Doctor Meyers asked, "And Johnson?"

The deputy warden grinned at me. "Why, take him back to his cell—for now. And you keep your chin up, kid."

Yes, sir," I said. "I'll do that."

Meyers wanted to know how I felt.

"Me, I feel fine," I told him.



"You can't outrun a bullet, Joey," he said. "You should know that by now."

C.O.D.—Cadaver on Delivery

By W. LEE HERRINGTON

Professor Beloit made one promise—that he'd deliver Mouthpiece Dexter Coulter before the trial. But he didn't say in what condition. . . .

THE WINDOWS were dirty, and the shades were cracked. Joey Flath paced the floor, the dampness of his underwear pushing clammy against him each time he came into the circle of humid air stirred up by the electric fan.

Flath wiped a wet hand over his glossy

dark hair and reached for the pair of unpressed trousers hanging limply from the brassy post of the bed. His hand flopped downward in indecision. For the fortieth time since daylight, he walked to the dresser and stared at the folded newspaper.

One hand crushed an empty cigarette package, and his other hand stirred in the ashtray, turning up the longer butts he had been so nervously tamping out since the paper came this morning.

The advertisement in the personal classified column was near the middle of the page. It had been the same for three days. Ringed with a wavering circle Joey Flath had made with a stubby pencil, the type was clear, precise, and indelibly memorized on Joey Flath's whirling brain. Nor did it change as he read it over once again:

\$45,000 REWARD

The above amount will be paid for the name or names of the person or persons responsible for or causing the death of Elna Beloit, April 30. Address communications to, or call in person at the address below: Talbot Beloit, 7642 River Drive, City.

Joey Flath mumbled to himself as the skimpy cigarette butt warmed hotly under his moist fingers. He walked quickly across the sparsely furnished room and switched off the electric fan that still had the inked price tag hanging from it. Late evening traffic sounds pushed up into the muggy air of the room and covered the lesser sound of the dying whine of the fan. The price tag ceased its aimless flutter and was motionless.

Flath dressed quickly, and sweat dripped from his chin in the humid air that warned of a coming thunderstorm. His hand left a wetness on the porcelain door-knob as he closed it behind him.

"THE AMOUNT," Joey Flath said, "has been the same for three days now. Forty-five thousand bucks."

His eyes followed the grey-haired man's inspection of the big room. The section of a shelf in one corner that was bare of books; the general air of age and time hovering about the room; the quick, nervous way Talbot Beloit let his eyes settle on Joey Flath. The eyes seemed to be the only living thing about him.

The old man's hands were a bit shaky, Joey noticed, and the throb of a high vein in the old man's throat seemed to be extremely slow and labored. As if having pulsed one beat, it pulsed again as an afterthought.

"The advertisement began July first," Flath said cautiously. "At five thousand. You ran it every week. Each week you added another five thousand."

Talbot Beloit slowly moved his head in assent, as if he were listening to the coached recitation of a student.

"Then last week it hit forty-five thousand," Flath went on. "You ran it Sunday, Monday, and today. Still at forty-five thousand." Flath paused, measuring his effect on the older man. "That means you've hit your top."

Talbot Beloit slowly nodded his shaggy head. He held one wavering hand toward Flath, wriggling the middle finger of the hand and looking at the wide band of pale skin contrasting deeply with the wrinkled, browned skin of the rest of his finger.

He said softly, "A rather nice emerald ring. I got six thousand for it." Beloit half turned and looked sadly at the library walls and the empty shelf in the corner. "There were some rare old volumes. They brought much less than I had anticipated. I had hoped to bring the amount of the reward to an exact fifty thousand. A nice, round figure. A bit more intriguing than the amount I managed—forty-five thousand." Beloit's mouth tightened. "Today was to be the last time. The advertisement wouldn't have been run tomorrow."

Joey Flath dampened his lips. Tomorrow! Better sharpen your timing a bit,

Joey, he cautioned himself. Pretty close.

"You want a name."

"Or names."

Flath hesitated. "Why would there be more than . . . just one name?"

Talbot Beloit squared around in his chair as if his bones were loose and sore. "Money," he said, "will buy a lot of things. Instead of lumping it all in a reward in the beginning, I wasted time and money hiring private detectives and running down implausible leads. All I got for my money was the conclusion that my grand-daughter, Elna Beloit, had no enemies. She was slain by means of a gunshot wound in the chest. Her body was tossed behind some bushes in the park. That would suggest that she knew something she should not have known."

"What could she know?" Flath squirmed in his chair under the old man's probing eyes.

Beloit massaged his ring finger and watched Joey Flath silently for a full minute. He saw the almost black hair growing in a straight line across a bulging forehead, a blueness of day-old whiskers mixed with sweat, and a wide, humorless mouth above a pointed chin. By his own temperament and because of his profession, caution had become second nature to Talbot Beloit, so that now he was hesitant to hazard a guess as to whether it was possible or not to read character from facial structure. Beloit was sure that he himself could not. But in seventy years, Talbot Beloit had learned the importance of money. And what it would buy.

"What could she know?" he repeated. "That is for you to say. You have answered my advertisement."

Flath shrugged. "Say that she was killed because she knew too much. If you can't have both, which will you choose? The man who killed her for a few hundred dollars or the man who hired it done?"

"I am prepared to ignore the mechanics of the matter and consider the moral angle,

Mr. Flath. Give me the man behind the hired killer. *His name?*"

"Suppose it was just a common killing? That happens every two or three minutes somewhere in the United States."

THE SLOW PULSE throbbed again in the old man's neck, a little more rapidly now. "We both know it was not 'just a common killing', Flath. *The name?*"

"The color of money," Flath warmed to his subject, "is black on one side, green on the other. I find looking at the black side restful on my eyes. The amount was forty-five thousand."

"I started the reward with five thousand. I waited patiently. You will have to learn patience as I did. Five thousand down-payment."

"Twenty-five thousand."

"Five!"

"We're haggling," Flath said sharply. "Suppose I give you the name of the man behind the killer. What happens to . . . the actual killer?"

"If it means the one or the other, I would willingly sacrifice the hired killer for the man behind him."

"Suppose there's a kickback? I'd be putting my neck in danger. What security have I?"

"No more than I have that you'll be giving me the right name." Beloit closed his veined eyelids.

"I'd be mortgaging my life," Flath insisted, and felt a cold scythe of sweat cut across his ribs.

Beloit opened his eyes and smiled grimly. "Time also has a very heavy mortgage on me. The last payment is probably overdue. *The name?*"

Beloit took an envelope from his pocket. A quick flash of lightning streaked across the growing darkness outside. He waited for the responding pound of thunder; then he leaned forward until only an arm's length separated them.

"The things that money will buy!"

Flath mixed a brief laugh with a sneer of his full lips. "We'll start off with five thousand. The guy you want is Fish Allison." Flath waved a hand. "No, wait. Let me finish. To get to this Fish Allison you got to consider his lawyer. They call Allison 'The Fish' because he's eeced out of everything they pinned on him up to now. That's because he's got the smartest lawyer in the business."

"Allison. Fish Allison."

"This lawyer," Flath said, ignoring the old man's interruption, "is Dexter Coulter. Allison never lets Coulter get very far from his elbow. You can't blame him. Dexter Coulter hasn't lost a case in twenty years. If Allison wants a guy bumped, Coulter passes the word and gets it done."

"Now to the girl," Beloit said. He tossed the ten five-hundred-dollar bills across the desk. "Tell me about that part."

Flath licked his lips, looking down at the money. "Fish is coming up for trial in a couple of weeks. A murder rap. There's a witness the State is depending on. Fish Allison is sitting in his car, talking to this guy. He hands this guy some dough and says, thanks pal, write me when you get to South America. Fish looks up of a sudden. Standing behind this mail box is the girl. She looks right at him. She doesn't say anything."

Flath's hand rasped suddenly across his stubbled chin. "It worries Fish. This

girl can wreck his whole apple cart. She can testify to the whole conversation. Fish tells Coulter."

Beloit's head bobbed. "Then this . . . Dexter Coulter procured a professional killer to kill Elna Beloit. *His name?*"

Joey Flath lunged forward and imprisoned the old man's arms while he explored the desk and the old man's pockets, then released him. When he was sure there were no weapons within reach, he returned to his chair and sat down. He reached out a hand and pulled the money to him.

"The deal was for a name. You got a name. A couple of names. Fish Allison . . . Dexter Coulter."

"Coulter hired you to kill my granddaughter!" The bitter knowledge came to Beloit quick and sure.

"You can leave that part out," Flath said. "Five thousand is five thousand. What about the rest of the forty-five grand?"

"Have you killed many people, Flath?"

"Skip the chatter. I told you what you wanted to know. I'll tell you something else. I made a deal with you. You buy me, I stay bought."

Talbot Beloit said dryly, "The definition of an honest crook, I believe." He stood up and watched the rain slap at the window. He drew back a little as lightning flared. Across the street, a tree trunk seemed to divide, and half of it was a man, darting across the sidewalk. Beloit's



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warm, dry skin called out to the lashing coolness of the rain, but he did not open the window. He pressed his face closer to the cool pane, intent on the dark form of the watcher who edged from tree to tree, finally disappearing behind a hedge at the corner. Beloit's surprised frown gave way to the hint of satisfaction. He turned.

"You still here, Flath? You are free to go any time you like. Call me in a week or two. Or shall I call you?"

"You kidding?" Flath laughed sharply and set his hat at a jaunty angle.

JOEY FLATH closed the heavy door behind him. His clothes whipped against him with the wind. He reached the street, crossed diagonally to the better-lighted side, and walked rapidly. His feet slowed. His hand went to his pants pocket. His feet stopped moving. Under the light, Joey Flath took the money out, shuffled it, and counted the ten bills again.

He began walking slowly, the bills held tight in his hand. A chill that wasn't from the night rain coursed quickly along Flath's spine.

"Joey . . . ?"

Joey Flath forced his feet to move rapidly.

"No, Joey. You can't outrun a bullet. You should know that. He paid off, Joey?"

"For God's sake." Joey Flath wet his suddenly parched lips. "I just put the bite on him for a free ride."

"How much did you tell him, Joey?" The voice from the darkness behind the hedge was cold and insistent.

"I just tapped him for five thousand." Flath got some of his wind back. His heart still hammered. "I just gave him a few verses and a little dance and he took the come-on. I didn't tell him from nothing."

"Oh, Joey!" The cold voice reproved him. "I always tried to teach you to lie big. You'll never learn." The voice had

the sound of a tired man rising to face a day of toil after a sleepless night. Even his last words were spoken impersonally. "Good-bye, sucker."

Joey Flath felt the first slug, his feet already moving toward the wideness of the boulevard up ahead. It was such a nice little street. Nice lawns, houses, a little too narrow and clean to die on. Such thoughts were a little foreign to Joey. He wondered if it was the reaction from the second slug that tore into his back. He half turned. How can a guy get all the way up to the boulevard to die? Joey took the third one, and as it swung him around, he thought he heard a chuckle, or maybe it was the crackle of lightning and a drum of thunder. At least Joey didn't feel the fourth one. He took it just above the bridge of his nose. He stumbled several steps. His body fell heavily on the freshly cut terrace and rolled a few feet toward the curbing.

The wind pushed at his face and lifted his hat, but Joey Flath couldn't feel it. It prodded his hair and probed at his hands like a playful kitten, tugging at the bits of paper Joey so loosely held. Then the wind sprinted away down the street, pushing one of the five-hundred-dollar bills high into the air. In the gutter, the rest of the bills dawdled along with other light debris, then flattened out like small rafts in the wedge of water that coursed along the street.

At the window of 7642 River Drive, the old man let the curtain slide into place. Then he looked down at his hand. He slowly balled the white envelope that had recently held five thousand dollars, crushed it between gnarled fingers, and tossed it in the wastebasket.

DEXTER COUTLER leaned back in his big chair and looked at his visitor impersonally. The man reminded Coulter of some withered, unpicked something on a forgotten vine. From long habit, Coulter

slumped down in his chair. It was a high-backed, leather-upholstered chair that Coulter liked to think of as being as comfortable and as impressive as those of the judges in front of whom he had for so long and so successfully performed his act.

To Coulter, it was an act. A mental sleight-of-hand to be practiced with words and mannerisms instead of nimble fingers. An act to be varied as the occasion or the crime demanded. And if the whole profession thought of him as a magician, it pleased Coulter to heighten the illusion in his own mind until he believed it too. And why not? A ten-dollar case twenty years ago and acquittal for a sneak thief. From then until now, not a case lost that really mattered. Not when the chips were down. It was almost a bore to Coulter to remember all his successes.

And now, having set his stage with the routine maneuver of making his opponent, or his client, nervous with waiting, Dexter Coulter leaned forward, inviting some expression of confidence. It was Coulter who frowned. His visitor seemed lost in either thought or his surroundings. Coulter varied his usual procedure and spoke invitingly.

"The—what was it again?—the Joseph Flath killing. Yes, I seem to remember seeing something in the newspapers."

"It was about as the papers had it," Talbot Beloit said. "A trifle inaccurate, perhaps, but then which of us is perfect?"

"An honest observation, Mr. Beloit. Go on, please."

"The news account stated there were no witnesses to the Flath slaying. A slight inaccuracy. There were two witnesses."

Dexter Coulter leaned forward a little to mask the fact that his right eyebrow had risen involuntarily.

"Two?"

"The killer and myself. Flath was shot four times. He had just left my home, where we had conferred on a matter that

concerned both of us very deeply."

"I should think then, Mr. Beloit, and this is my professional opinion, that you should have consulted the police instead of me. I am a lawyer, not a confessor."

"Joseph Flath," Beloit said softly and his voice was labored, "was a professional killer. I understand that he has been involved in a number of killings that have not been proved against him. Perhaps it is as well that he died as he killed, anonymously."

"That is one way of looking at it," Coulter agreed. "But why do you consult with me?"

"It happens that there remained certain unfinished details of the matter I had discussed with Flath. I should like to have you come to my home, stand before the window from which I witnessed his death. Just a whim, you might say. But in doing so, you could put yourself in my position. You might then advise me better as to what course I should take."

"My fees are rather stiff," Coulter said.

Talbot Beloit smiled and nodded his head. "I managed to make quite a bargain a few days ago. In the course of the haggling, I made a profit of some forty thousand dollars. I am prepared to pay. You will come with me?"

DEXTER COULTER snapped his fingers in pretended comprehension. "I remember you now. Beloit—the fellow who has been running the ad in the paper. The reward. I take it, then, that Flath gave you the information you wanted. That you bought his information for five thousand dollars."

"That is correct. Flath gave me a name Allison. Fish Allison."

"Allison," Coulter repeated. "This is a little awkward, Mr. Beloit. I happen to be Allison's attorney."

"Allison is coming to trial in a week or so for murder. You are going to defend

him at the trial, I believe, Mr. Coulter?"

"If he comes to trial," Coulter amended. "Allison is charged with the murder of an obscure person. There was a witness or so it was alleged, but this witness has gone to South America. I anticipate no great difficulty in gaining Allison an acquittal."

Talbot Beloit smiled blandly. "Allison paid the witness to disappear and then discovered that someone was standing almost at his side, hidden by a mailbox. He realized he faced even greater danger for, in bribing the witness to leave the country, he had tacitly admitted his guilt of the murder. Allison immediately arranged to have this new menace removed. Joey Flath, a hired killer, was given the job. He murdered the girl—it was a girl, you know—and tossed her body away. It was a cold, calculating, and brutally commercial thing. The girl was my grand-daughter, Elna Beloit."

Dexter Coulter allowed disbelief to tinge his voice. "If, as you say, Flath was the killer of your grand-daughter, why would he talk to you, no matter what sum of money you offered him?"

"I convinced Flath that I wanted the man who ordered the girl killed more than I wanted Flath."

Talbot Beloit leaned his frail body closer to the edge of the big desk. "Let me have your professional estimate. Without the missing witness, without Elna Beloit being able to testify that she saw and heard Allison pay money to the missing witness, what chance is there of convicting him?"

"We are being honest, Mr. Beloit. Allison goes to trial a week from today. The evidence against him is weak, but there is always a chance of conviction. With me at his side, there is—" Coulter pretended to weigh the odds—"there is about one chance in a million that he will be convicted."

"Suppose you do not represent him?"

Dexter Coulter felt a moment's uneasiness. Had this doddering old fool seen him, had he been somewhere near that hedge, his presence masked by thunder, when he himself had shot down Joey Flath? Looking at Beloit's aged, rheumy eyes, he pushed aside fear.

Coulter said stiffly, "If I do not represent him, Allison would find the odds reversed. Without me, Allison will go to the chair."

"You are that important to him."

"I know my business," Coulter said simply.

"So do I." A thin light of brightness flashed for a few seconds in the old man's eyes. "At least, I used to. In my day, I was as good at my craft as you are at yours, Mr. Coulter."

Dexter Coulter stood up. The little old man was beginning to annoy him. "Good-night, Mr. Beloit. I don't think we have anything further to discuss."

"Before I retired a number of years ago," Beloit said, "I was one of the finest, if you will permit me, one of the best biochemists in the country."

"I am not interested in biochemistry," Coulter snapped. "Good-night."

"Strange," Beloit mused. "I find my interest in it re-awakening." The old man sighed. "You will not come to my home then?"

"Certainly not."

Was it going to be necessary to throw the old fool out bodily? And if he did, what then? Would Beloit go to the police with his veiled hints concerning Joey Flath's death and Coulter's involvement in that death? Coulter knew that Beloit would not do that. He would take whatever measures were necessary to insure Beloit's silence.

Dexter Coulter came around the desk. He stopped. His eyes blinked as fear stole into them. He stared hard at the unbelievably small gun. Talbot Beloit let the little twin-barreled, over-and-under

Derringer waggle as he pointed it. Dexter Coulter's legal mind deserted him and made room in his brain for something that had been lost to him for a long time. He became quite humanly normal and frightened.

"The odds," Beloit said coldly, "are a million to one that I could not miss at this distance." He stepped back a few feet and waved the gun in the direction of the door. "I have a taxicab waiting outside, Mr. Coulter. Come just as you are. You must see the view from my library window, Mr. Coulter."

When Talbot Beloit punched at him from behind with the Derringer, Dexter Coulter obeyed. He threw frequent glances over his shoulder as they went down the hall and out the front door. But there were no servants handy to sound an alarm. Coulter had never permitted servants to hang around where they might overhear anything he didn't want them to.

The smallness of men's minds, Coulter marveled now. The lack of knowledge of how these things really worked. As if the simple kidnaping of Fish Allison's attorney would have any effect. A week from today, if he had not managed to escape from the old man by that time or his whereabouts had not been discovered, an underling would go before the court, explain the mysterious absence of Dexter Coulter, and a routine delay would follow. The smallness of men's minds, Coulter

thought again, and found comfort in the thought.

Talbot Beloit got into the cab last. The cab driver flipped the flag down and got into gear. What the hell, the cab driver mused, he had a lot of years left in him yet, just like this hack he drove. Not like the old character in the back who had to hang on close to somebody when he walked or when he climbed into a cab. The driver pulled the shift lever into high and tooled the cab down the wide avenue.

FISH ALLISON paced the room like a weary animal. He fingered his flowered necktie and brought his worried face around toward the man seated at the conference table.

"That telephone call," Allison said. "You couldn't trace it?"

The seated man shrugged. "Try it yourself some time. No identification, no names, nothing but the promise that Dexter Coulter will be here some time before you go to trial."

Allison said savagely, "Twenty minutes more and we go in there and things start popping. Its a trick to get me to trial without Coulter. Can't you get a delay?"

Animosity was thinly disguised in the other man's voice. "You are properly represented by counsel. I can't get you a delay. I am not Dexter Coulter, remember."

"I'll say you're not," Allison snapped.



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"With Coulter on the job, we'd go in, grab off a jury, the State would present their case, and Coulter would do the rest. The boys didn't turn up any trace of him?"

"No trace," the seated man said wearily. "Just went up in thin air. I'll do what I can, but you know how juries are. I'm not Dexter Coulter."

"Quit reminding me of it," Allison barked. "Get out. Circulate. See if Coulter has shown up at home yet. Do something!"

"Okay, okay. I'll do what I can."

Fish Allison began pacing the room again as the door closed behind his substitute lawyer. Finally weariness forced him into a chair, his head in his hands. When the door opened again, he looked up, wild hope within him. The hope died dully as he watched the man come in and close the door.

A little scrawny character. Some old, beat-up jack-leg lawyer, maybe, the boys had dug up somewhere to help this other incompetent. Times were really getting tough with the boys. The old character didn't seem to have enough life left in him to stand alone, much less plead a case before a jury.

"What the hell do you want, Pop?" Allison asked savagely.

"You're Allison?"

Allison nodded. "So what?"

"If you don't mind, I'll sit down." The old man looked over the tops of his eyeglasses, picked out a chair, and absent-mindedly set the brown corrugated box he carried on another chair. "You got my telephone message?"

Allison bounded from his chair and gripped the old man's arms.

"I get it now. You're this old fool Talbot Beloit. The girl's grandfather. You kidnaped Dexter Coulter."

"You may say I induced him to accompany me to my home. You may rest assured, however, that Coulter was faithful to you. I had no success whatever in

making him talk. Now, Joey Flath was different."

"To hell with Flath. Where is Coulter?"

Beloit looked at him calmly. "Realizing a man is entitled to have his lawyer with him in moments of stress, I have taken great pains to see that Coulter will be by your side when you go to trial."

FISH ALLISON stared down into the seamed face, seeing the placid, solid honesty of the old eyes. He loosened his grip on the little man's arm.

"That's better," he said in a relieved voice.

"I'm a little mixed up," the old man said. "Was it your idea for Coulter to shoot Flath because Flath came to my home in answer to my advertisement, or did it occur to Coulter?"

"Keep on guessing, Pop. What's the difference?"

"Maybe it isn't important." Beloit hesitated. "You had Flath kill my granddaughter because you feared her testimony that you had bribed a witness. That was quite unnecessary. Elna Beloit would not have been dangerous to you."

"Why not? She heard the whole thing."

Talbot Beloit shook his head. "That would have been impossible. My granddaughter was a deaf mute."

"A what?"

Beloit nodded. "She could not have harmed you. Well, I must be getting along. The inspector is waiting. I'll leave you and your lawyer alone. You'll have a great many things to tell him."

Fish Allison blinked his eyes. "An extra killing for nothing," he grumbled. "Damn Coulter and his master-minding."

Allison went over to the long table, sat down again with his head in his hands. After a few seconds, he resumed his nervous pacing. He saw the brown cardboard box. He grabbed its loose string and

(Continued on page 112)

Macabre Museum

Mayan & Jakobsson



Handsome, debonair, brilliant Dr. Robert Clements, of fashionable Southport, England, was a "women's doctor" and a ladies' man. His first marriage financed his beginner's practice, and his bride died suddenly and mysteriously when all but \$60 of her fortune was gone. Dr. Clements was similarly fair to his second and third wives—they lived while they could pay their way; too, he was a model husband and doctor, consultant at some of England's finest hospitals.

Dr. Clements' fourth wife, however, proved miserly, and the doctor had to hurry if he were to enjoy her wealth. He was now 60. He fed her a fast poison, but couldn't keep police out of it. He committed suicide.



The eighteenth century in France was marked by an earlier revolt than the famous Revolution. It was the revolt of professional hangmen against the introduction of that new-fangled machine, the guillotine. Hanging, they claimed, was much more efficient.

The execution of the famous revolutionist Robespierre finally established the guillotine as the superior instrument. Robespierre, while resisting capture, had had his jaw shot away—and you cannot hang a jawless man. The guillotine, however, removed his chinless head from his neck with dispatch.

When Mme. Marie Christofie, a French widow, was found bludgeoned to death on her lonely farm, police were stumped; but Angelo Brigo, the dead woman's deaf-mute hired hand, indicated he had something to tell. Since he was completely illiterate, communications were difficult—until the gendarmes sent for a movie camera and a cast of actors. They "shot" Brigo at his chores, showed him the pictures, and he understood. This was his story—the story he'd never been able to tell.

He lived his part with a will. Police had their first hint of real tragedy when the deaf-mute began to make love to the dead widow's understudy and met with instinctive repulsion. He seized an axe—it was papier mache and broke when he used it. In a real frenzy, his powerful hands closed around the throat of the understudy—and police knew they had their killer.

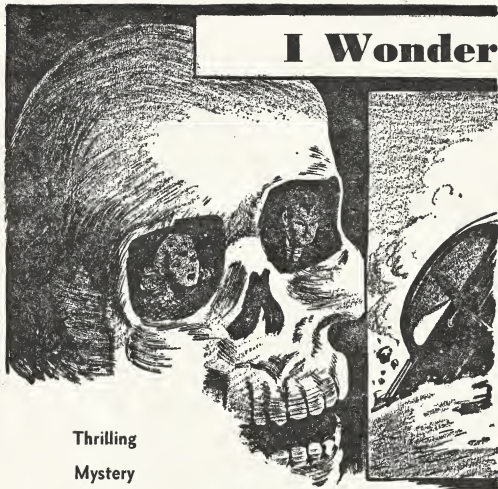


A married man nearing fifty, Captain William Cranstoun, of Scotland, nevertheless courted twenty-five-year-old Mary Blandy—object more or less matrimony. He would have married her, too, except that her father would not give his consent. The captain convinced Miss Blandy that her parent's obduracy was caused by illness, gave her "medicinal" powders to cure him with.

Blandy died, poisoned, and Cranstoun fled the country with the loot from the estate. Mary was hanged. Cranstoun died before he was caught, and the sole heirs for the Blandy fortune turned out to be—Cranstoun's own unwanted wife and son!



I Wonder



Thrilling
Mystery
Novelette

"We got to bang him up a little more," someone said. They went to work on me then, in earnest.

Rennels was just an ordinary guy—and that was the trouble. For why should anyone go to all that bother to knock off a guy whose wife wasn't worth stealing, who didn't have a nickel in the bank—and who used up so many would-be killers that the morgue ran out of slabs?

CHAPTER ONE

The Killers

I'D SAT there in that little bistro off Forty-first Street soaking up cheap bourbon for about five hours, and it was almost noon when I finally decided to change the scenery a little and go to another

bar. So I wandered out, intending to go to another little favorite of mine over on Third. It was then I found out that I was marked for the morgue.

I started to step off the curb and—

Who's Killing Me Now



By
BRYCE
WALTON



whooom! The car's tires lost rubber on the curb, and the big, black sedan swerved away, and I caught a glimpse of a couple of hard faces—very disappointed faces—looking back at me.

I staggered back and leaned against something. I was sick. Sweat ran down under my collar, and my knees were shaking. That car had been parked up the block a little way, and it had roared at me all at once. Only intuition or something had made me step back onto the curb.

And I knew they'd almost come clear up on the sidewalk to get me.

I stumbled back inside the joint I'd just tried to leave. I was no longer in condition to walk over to Third, or any place else. I ordered two straight shots, and after they were gone I ordered another double and sat looking at it.

I'd never been much, I guess, just a common working-class stiff wandering from one lousy job to another and not liking any of them. That was what bothered me: Who would want to murder me? I had no enemies, certainly nobody *that* special. I'd had a few tiffs now and then. A few debts I hadn't paid. But I wasn't important enough, as far as I could see, to go gunning for.

I thought of Marge, my wife. Hell, a man's wife almost always wants to murder him. And Marge hated my guts. Sure, Marge and Leo Harnell, the cuban-heeled punk who lived in the same apartment building.

But Marge couldn't plan anything like this alone. However, if she was in with a tough like Harnell, who was hell with the ladies, she might try it.

I remembered what she'd yelled at me this morning: "Don't think I wouldn't like to see you drop dead!"

I thought, too, of the night before when I'd gotten food poisoning, and the ambulance had to come to pump out my stomach. Food from Marge's table.

THAT morning had started out like almost every morning since I'd married Marge. Like a hangover, like a bad taste. Like any damned thing you can think of except the way it should.

I'd married her for love, and also because her old man was supposed to leave her a nice chunk of real estate when he kicked off. But mostly for love, I guess. Anyway, I hung on to her when I wondered why I didn't get out. Maybe I still remembered Marge the way she was when she married me, a knockout with a slim, lovely body and soft, blonde hair. Or maybe I was still strong for what she might still be under those layers of fat she had now. At any rate, I was still around that morning when I shoveled grapefruit into my mouth and started unfolding the morning paper.

"Ugh," I choked. "Listen, honey, you forgot the sugar again. You know how I—"

She started to cry. "Stop blubbing," I yelled, still feeling upset because of the food poisoning she'd handed me last night. "And eat your breakfast, honey, or you're liable to lose some weight."

She cried louder and then yelled. "I wish you were dead!"

Her lips curled like a little pouting girl's. But her eyes were bright with hate and a kind of hopelessness. She repeated it for emphasis, which wasn't necessary. "I wish you were dead!" She meant it.

I snapped open the paper. The big headlines didn't mean much to me—then. I read it aloud to Marge, knowing that would dry up her tears for a while. She liked murder stories. She read every murder novel ever written. She'd lie in bed every evening eating big, thick sandwiches, drinking milk, and munching cherry-center chocolates. I read to her:

FAMOUS LAWYER-HISTORIAN FOUND DEAD

Albert Vandon, well-known lawyer and local historian, was found dead in his downtown

I WONDER WHO'S KILLING ME NOW

office at five P.M. this afternoon. He died from a revolver shot in the right temple. The weapon was found in his right hand. Police tentatively marked the death as suicide, but a thorough investigation is being made . . .

There was some more about Vandon's famous research into New York history, and how he'd been working on a book manuscript about shocking real estate deals, or something. I found out the facts later. How could I have suspected that Vandon's murder—and it *was* murder—tied in with my own troubles? Hell, I didn't know any more about Al Vandon than a Jap garbage collector knows about Hirohito! And as for this other guy, Southerton, who moved in later, I knew even less.

I tried the eggs. Cold and too greasy. I wasn't hungry. "Just like I've been telling you, honey. These big shots lead a helluva life. Fame and fortune's a headache. We should be satisfied here with our little apartment and—"

"Shut up!" She screamed at me.

"Yell a little louder," I said. "Maybe they can't hear you across the street."

"Go on," she yelled. Her body shivered like a hunk of pale jello. "Make excuses for us living in this two-room dump. Oh, it was going to be great, remember? You were going to take a correspondence course and try to pound some sense into that vacuum you call a head!"

"Now look, baby—"

"And we were going to have a big place on Long Island where it's cool, and where we could have a garden and—"

I couldn't help it. I was up and away from the table. I felt my hand smacking her fat face, back and forth, back and forth. I was boiling. Really boiling. It didn't make a healthy sound, my hand on her face. It didn't crack with a healthy tightness. It was a heavy dull sound.

She choked and clenched her fingers and ground her teeth together. She managed to lift herself to her feet. Her face was wet and pale. She started to shake. For a minute I thought she was going to pass out she was so mad. I was a little scared.

I couldn't help cracking, "How did I know your old man intended to live forever, just to spite me?"

SHE WASN'T crying any more. "Never keep a job, don't care for anything, never take me out, never anything, and I'm sick of it. Sick . . . all through. . ."

I looked at her and wondered why I'd stayed around. Something had happened to her a year after we were married. Glands or something. She said it was me. She started going to fat, fast. She was shapeless under her housecoat, her hair stringy, cold cream still on her face.

I threw the paper to the wall. "Look," I said. "I'm not interested in small jobs and petty cash. I'm waiting for a chance



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to make the big wad. Either you're in the big time or it ain't worth it. Sure, I'll take a small job, but I don't stand for any gaff while I'm on it. This last job, a damn fool foreman got uppity, so I had to beat him up, and I got fired."

She turned around and pounded the wall. Her broad beam faced me. It was so hard to remember her figure the way it had been before, when they threw the rice.

"I'll kill you," she yelled. "I can't stand it any more. I want to kill you!"

I felt cold. I opened the door into the hall, and I turned, holding the door open and staring at her back. "Play it smart then, honey. I've still managed to keep that insurance policy paid up. There'd be ten grand in it for you. Don't be a sucker and lose your head and do a clumsy job."

She turned and swung. I slammed the door. The heavy bookend smashed against the opposite side of the door, on a level with my head. I leaned against the wall. I was sick. Through the door I heard her last sweet farewell:

"Don't think I wouldn't like to see you drop dead!"

Halfway down the hall I ran into Leo Harnell, which was adding insult to injury. He was standing there in my way with a wet grin on his powdered face, leering at me. Slim, with oiled, wavy hair, his tight pinstripe suit and Cuban heels, he made me even sicker than I already was. I hate punks like that, and I can't see why the women go for them. He made his wages welching on women mostly, with ponies and books and other pastimes on the side. He had friends who had seen the insides of half the jails in the country.

He lived on the same floor. Another guy in the building had told me that Leo had been seen gabbing with Marge a few times lately. I didn't take it broad-mindedly. I busted the guy until he passed out, telling him all the time he was a liar. Just the same I hated to see Leo standing there, grinning, and knowing he'd overheard

Marge and me fighting with each other.

It hit me all at once, how much I hated his guts and how much I suspected him of getting next to my wife. I told him to get out of my way. He just stood there grinning, so I belted him.

He coughed and his face got red as he leaned over against the wall holding his belly. Then he straightened up and dabbed at his face with a silk handkerchief. His eyes froze like black glass. For a second I felt scared of the little punk. I thought he might pull a knife, or a gun, or something.

"You shouldn't have done that, Rennels," he said with an accent. "Ask anybody how it is to push Leo Harnell around."

He'd dropped a paper-backed book he'd been carrying. He stooped to pick it up. I wanted to knee him right in the mouth, but I didn't. Instead, I laughed and went on out onto the street.

It was July. It was raining a little, but all it did was give the hot pavement a steam bath. The dirty brick antique houses along Fifteenth seemed to be sweating, the way I was. I took the Seventh Avenue subway uptown. I thought about taking my own 1937 jalopy, but decided against it. I didn't have much change on me, and I wanted to use the money I'd spend for parking to buy a few drinks.

I had some idea of going to an employment agency, but I never made it. I ended up in this bistro which is my favorite. There was always something morbid and degrading about being kicked off a job and crawling around for another, an experience I usually put off as long as possible. I'd done everything from hacking to fry-cooking, and I was sick of the whole business from A to Z. I'd always hated work. I was waiting for my big break. A guy once called me Mohammed because I was always waiting for the big break to come to me, but I never got the connection.

Besides, my unemployment money would keep me going for a while. And meantime, maybe Marge's old man would take one too many slugs of that cheap whiskey he drank all the time and kick over with that pile he'd been hoarding for seventy years.

I got tired of that place, as I've said, and wandered outside. And then that car tried to come up onto the sidewalk to murder me.

CHAPTER TWO

In a Dark Clearing. . .

I CAME back inside and sat down in the corner, shaking as if I had a chill. It hadn't been an accident; I knew that. And neither had that food poisoning the night before. That car had been out to get me, but good. And it must have been Leo Harnell, or somebody he could hire. And if it was Leo, then Marge probably was in on it too. After all, Leo hadn't had the chance to poison my supper. But Marge . . .

I wouldn't have thought so yesterday. I thought so now, the way Marge had looked at me, the way she had told me off that morning. She wanted to kill me, all right. But would she plot it out with Leo Harnell?

I sat there and kept drinking. I thought of everybody who might want to kill me. And there wasn't anyone else. I'd had a few run-ins with guys, but they were the kind of guys who could fight back, not the kind who hold a grudge. I was pretty sure of that.

I kept thinking, kept figuring every angle. And it always ended up with Marge and Leo Harnell. They'd been in the same apartment building for four years. They'd been seen talking, and there was no telling how far the thing had gone. She would tell him about her old man going to leave her a nice chunk of income property.

She hated me. What would be more natural than for them to decide to get rid of me?

How would they do it? A car could run me down. I could fall into the river. I could bump myself off. Hell, that was it! My insurance money would be part of the deal too. Harnell would know about that.

It's funny, but I didn't hate Harnell so much as I did Marge. After all, Leo was an outsider, but Marge and I were supposed to be—partners? Is that the word? I guess I laughed a little thinking about it, but I still hated her more than Leo.

I was drunk. It was dark outside. It was late. I'd go home and have it out with Marge, find Leo. I could beat the truth out of Leo and get away from Marge while I was still able.

I went outside. I went over to Fifth Avenue and started walking toward Fifteenth Street. It was cooler tonight, and I wanted to walk a long time through the drizzle and walk off my drunk.

I didn't have enough money left to take a hack, and I felt too ill to ride the subway. So I walked. I walked down Fifth, and by the time you walk down Fifth to about Nineteenth Street, it begins to get dark, and the alleyways begin showing up and it gets quiet, except for the joints.

I walked faster. I forgot that I was sick. I forgot I'd been drinking. I forgot I was supposed to be sick and drunk. I forgot everything except that car swerving to get me, and Marge and Leo Harnell talking, talking, all the time I was away, about her old man's real estate property, and about the ten grand Marge would get if I should suddenly and accidentally join the hearse parade. How would they figure it? Maybe I'd be found floating in the river with a little note pinned on my breast saying, "Dear Marge, I'm tired of it all. . . ." There were a thousand ways. . .

I was all at once scared, scared silly. I tried walking next to the dark buildings, but then I had to shy away from the

alleys. I tried walking next to the gutter, but then every one of the few cars that passed made me jump and dive back toward the buildings.

A cop spotted me. I took it easy, walking straight. The cops couldn't help me. I couldn't run whining to a policeman and say, "Look, fellas, my wife and another guy's trying to kill me. This afternoon a car almost ran over me, and that's how I know."

I could hear them laughing already, so there was no use seeing the cops. I kept walking. I wasn't afraid of Leo Harnell. But I was scared as hell of being waylaid in the dark and taken somewhere by friends of his. Harnell had those kind of friends. He'd been mixed up with mobs, I'd heard. If I could get to Leo first. . . .

But I didn't.

I'd lost the cop. And they caught me in the middle of the block. My own car stopped, and several guys jumped out at me. They did it fast. They did it easy and fast and efficiently, as if they'd been doing it all their lives.

I punched the first guy and turned to run. I should have started running sooner. I should have ran faster. I don't know what I should've done. Whatever it was, I didn't. A foot caught one of my ankles and I slid on my face along the wet concrete. I rolled and started yelling. Now I could use the cops. Now they wouldn't laugh. And then I stopped yelling. A muddy wet toe caught me in the face. "Don't open your face again, or we'll wipe it off."

I tried to say something. I felt blood trickling down my throat. But I couldn't get my mouth shut again once I'd opened it. It felt as if somebody had jammed a crowbar through my jaws. The warm blood kept trickling down my throat. I felt around inside my mouth with my tongue. It felt like raw hamburger.

They lifted me. There were four of them, I guess. I don't remember now.

Their faces were blurred, and I didn't recognize any of them. Their voices didn't mean anything.

They dragged me inside my own sedan, my own 1937 jalopy. More evidence against Marge and Leo, sure. She had a key to the car. Well, they were going to kill me with my own car. I knew it, of course. Harnell and Marge had sent a mob to get me, just like in the books she read all the time. For her old man's dough, Harnell did it, and for the ten grand Marge would get after she identified me at the morgue.

Then I finally got sick. It was a mess. The guys on either side of me started swearing a blue streak. "Hit him! Hit him and get him out of his misery for a while. We got a long ride yet."

I pawed at the door handle. I got hold of it. "Buddy, don't be in a hurry. We'll let you out when we're ready. Relax."

To help me relax, they dropped the car top down on my head. It fell on me again. A light that had kept on burning somewhere went out.

IT WAS raining hard out there somewhere, I don't remember where. I wouldn't know it if I saw it again. A thread of wet highway went off through the trees, and just in front of me was a big, dark clearing. The car was facing the clearing. We were on the edge of a jump-off with a forest in back, that's all I remember.

Another car drove up and parked. The motor died. Things were quiet then, except for the guys breathing in back of me. Their breathing got louder, and my back prickled with fear. I was shot already, and all they had to do was finish it. I tried to see who was in the car that had just driven up, but I couldn't see. It was a classy job, long and black, a Cadillac. I figured it was a rented outfit. I imagined Leo and Marge in it. Women like to see things like that done to a guy, even though

they don't admit it. Some women, anyway.

A fist punched me in the kidney. I started to fold. A guy held me. I was looking into his face. It was shaved down to a shine like polished glass, brown and healthy from sunlamp and the barber shop. In the rain, he smelled of talc and perfumed hair oil.

My jalopy started up, and the guy jumped out of it. They yanked me out of the way as it jumped past me and over the side of the cliff. Two or three clanging bangs, one big crash that sounded way down below, and it was over.

The talced guy took out a piece of paper and jammed it into my pants pocket. "A parting note," he said. "It tells of how much you hate this world, and how much you want to get out of it. In other words, you're bumping yourself off."

I tried to say something, but my mouth wouldn't work. My head pounded, and I was sick again.

Somebody else said, "He'd get banged up more than he is now, in a crash like that."

"Yeah, guess so. All right, pal."

They went to work on me, in earnest. Gun butts hammered my forehead. I went down, and blood ran into my eyes and bright lights went on. I tried to scream. The blows became a far-away drumming, on somebody else's skull, it seemed. I felt as if I was drifting through a red fog. Some time after that, they pushed me

over. But I didn't remember them doing it.

* * *

It must have been a long time later that I opened my eyes. They'd intended to kill me, and they'd come so close that maybe it didn't make any difference now. I licked rain water off my lips. I tried to move. I kept on trying, and after a while I did. I sat up. I felt cold, wet metal, and it was the rear bumper of my jalopy, what was left of it.

I pulled myself up and fell away across rocks and on my face again. Maybe it wasn't as far down as they'd thought. Maybe they thought they'd finished me when they pushed me over the side. You're supposed to be able to kill a guy by hitting him over the head.

Anyway, I was still alive. Not very much, but just enough to want to live a while longer. Enough to think of Leo and Marge. Little, dark-eyed Leo. And big, fat Marge. I whispered their names over and over until I couldn't whisper any more. Then I thought about them and how nice it would be if I had both of them there right then. And then I thought of the only other way I'd have to go to them. I probably would've stayed there and died if Leo and Marge hadn't been somewhere else, where I had to be, too.

I tried to get up again. I leaned against the wrecked car and lost the rest of what-

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ever I'd eaten last. I ran my right hand over myself. My left hand wouldn't work, and the arm seemed to have two elbows in it. My face was puffed up and broken. My scalp felt like a busted orange crate. My body was one big pain.

I couldn't stand up, so I crawled. I kept crawling and hanging onto roots and pulling myself through the mud and over rocks. I don't know how I did it. I know it took a long time. But it was as if Leo and Marge were up there helping me. I finally got back up on the shoulder and passed out again next to the asphalt slab. . . .

A TRUCK DRIVER stopped for me at dawn. I was on my knees in the middle of the highway, and I didn't care whether he stopped or not. He didn't ask any questions. He walked over and looked down to where my car was jammed on the rocks, and he whistled. I tried to explain that I'd had an accident, but what was the use? My jaws wouldn't work.

He kept his eyes off me, and when I looked in the mirror I knew why. I was something to scare goblins.

He let me off in a cloud of early morning fog by the river, and I started walking. I had loosened up by then, and I could walk a little. I bummed a shot of bourbon at a service station just opening up, and I cleaned up a little and threw my coat into a trash can. I looked a little better in my shirt, which wasn't so gory.

I walked over to Seventh Avenue and leaned against the wall waiting for a hock shop to open up. I knew the guy who ran it. An old pal of mine. I know a lot of people here. Lived in New York all my life, and one of my ancestors settled here when there wasn't anything but redskins trying to trade corn for rot-gut. I thought I'd mention that here because it ties in with Vandon being murdered, and with Southerton.

But this guy in the hock shop wasn't

enough of a pal of mine to lend me a snub-nosed .38 he had in a showcase inside. His name was Mike Eisenberg. Long and thin in dark, baggy clothes and a striped silk shirt. He wore the heavy framed glasses that bank presidents wear. We argued. I wasn't so weak that his glasses didn't break when I hit him. He sat down behind the counter, bleeding and cussing me out.

I loaded the .38 and put it in my hip pocket. I stuffed a handkerchief around it to make the bulge look natural, and let part of the cloth show. I told Eisenberg if he phoned the cops or anything I'd find some way to take care of him later. I didn't say it very clearly, but he seemed to get the idea.

"You're going to kill somebody with it," he sighed.

I wasn't worrying then about what would happen afterwards. I remember saying, "Sure, Mike, that's right, you guessed it."

"I always knew you'd come to no good end, Mart," he choked after me.

I started home. Home sweet home.

I WALKED fast in the early morning. Things seemed to be pretty dead yet. A few street-cleaning brushes still rotated around. As I walked it started to rain a little again. A warm, slow drizzle. I felt lousy, and it was all I could do to keep going. I tried to take my mind off the pain and think about the possible angles. But it couldn't be anyone else but Marge and Leo. They'd been getting together. Soon as I'd left, Leo had gone in to see Marge. They'd made a quick decision to get me, and Marge knew what bar I'd go to so that Leo had some boys could be out there waiting for me.

Now they surely must think I was dead, and I should be fairly safe. But for some reason I still felt as if I was being tailed. I kept looking back but didn't see anything suspicious. Every passing car or

pedestrian gave me the shakes, anyway.

And then I thought—what if they'd left someone out there on the highway to watch, to make sure of what happened after it got light so they could see? And what if they'd seen me hop a ride with the truck driver, and tailed me?

By the time I got to my apartment building, I felt sure I was being followed. At the end of the block, I saw the big Cadillac turn the corner and park. No one got out. I ducked in under the stairs—there was another basement door there—and I stood there watching the Caddy. No one got out. I wondered if the driver had seen me. It might be Leo, still in a rented car, or some more of the kind Leo could hire. Leo didn't look big time, but I knew he had a lot of connections.

I hurried up two flights of stairs, wondering if I'd be able to make it up the last one. The yellow night light was still on in the hall. I hurried. Marge might be worried. I laughed. She might still be waiting up for me. I took hold of the knob with my right hand. My other arm wasn't doing me any good. It was three times its normal size, and it seemed to belong to several other guys.

I seemed to hear footsteps on the stairs, but I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure of anything, except the way I hated them, and how I was going to kill them. What happened after that wouldn't matter. Give me time to get even with Leo and Marge, and I wouldn't care about an army coming up the stairs.

The door was locked. I fumbled in my pockets for the keys. I felt the crumpled paper and pulled it out. I'd forgotten about it. The suicide note they'd stuffed into my pants last night.

I unfolded it with the thumbs on my right hand and read it. It came up and hit me in the face. My throat filled up and I wanted to yell but couldn't. It was crazy.

to end it. You in your way, and me in my way. I'm driving our car off a mountain side tonight, like we agreed for me to do. I'm sorry I couldn't do it with you, your way. But I could never stand the thought of gas . . .

A drop of sweat fell on the paper. The words came up and hit me again. "*. . . do it with you, your way . . . gas. . .*"

Gas? Then I smelled it. Maybe I wouldn't have smelled it but for the words on the note. I didn't bother with the keys. I stepped back and ran into the door with my right shoulder. I bounced back and then I hit it again. I felt crazy inside. I didn't feel anything on the outside.

Leo . . . I kept thinking of Leo. I didn't know how he'd worked it. But he'd rigged it up to look like a suicide pact. Somehow, he stood to benefit from her suicide too. Maybe he'd talked her into making out a will, with him as beneficiary. It didn't make much sense. Nothing did.

The door gave way. I turned off the gas whispering out of the phony fireplace and wrestled up some windows. Then I ran over to the studio couch and tried to make her breath again.

"Marge . . . Marge . . ." I kept saying it over and over. She looked like something that had never been alive, like a big mound of dough. And then—it was funny, but I didn't see her the way she'd looked that morning when I'd left mad because she'd forgot to put sugar in my grapefruit half. I saw her the way I'd married her. She didn't seem fat and flabby as I slapped her face and rubbed her hands and arms trying to make her breathe again.

I must have done that for quite a while before I stopped and sat there beside her, knowing she wouldn't breathe any more no matter what I thought or did about it.

She didn't move or open her eyes. She didn't breathe. She looked as if she was too tired to even want to try.

I said I was sorry for the times I'd slapped her and kicked her around. I said

Dearest Marge: I'm glad we finally decided

I was sorry for not taking her out nights, and insulting her because she was fat. I told her I was sorry because I'd made her get fat because there wasn't anything else for her to do. I told her over and over that I was sorry. Sorry for everything that didn't work right, about the things I'd said about her old man because he wouldn't die, and about my not working and getting money, about all those crazy ideas I'd had of making millions and having a mansion on Long Island. . . .

But she wasn't listening.

CHAPTER THREE

Dead Man's Inheritance

I HEARD the door move. I rose up and turned around. All I could see was his grinning face, the greasy, wavy hair. I could smell the perfume from him. Leo Harnell standing there, grinning at me. His pinstripe suit with the low drape and the padded shoulders.

I felt noises coming out of my throat. Everything about this lousy world that I'd always hated came out of me, and it was Leo's face. He licked his lips, and the grin sort of crumbled away. His voice was hoarse.

"So you finally killed her, Rennels. I knew you would."

He moved sideways toward the door. "I'm calling the cops. Don't make a funny move, Rennels. I've got a gun." He patted his coat, up high where a shoulder holster was supposed to be.

He slid his hand inside his coat. He stared at me. He blinked and wet his lips. He kept looking at me, and his lips twitched. He could see how I felt about him, about everything.

"You almost made it look good, Rennels," he said. He swallowed. "Turning on the gas and croaking her, then breaking in again. But I'm calling the cops. My testimony will queer this phony setup of

yours. I'll fix you good, Rennels."

I walked toward him.

"You did it, damn you, and you know it," I said. "But I'm not arguing about it. I'm not going to the police about it. I'm going to kill you, you damned, simpering, little two-timer! You couldn't even be straight with Marge!"

I stumbled there a minute and wanted to fold up. Because I hadn't been straight with Marge, either, not by a hell of a lot. I'd treated her like dirt, and then, when she bounced off me, I'd decided to murder her. Murder her. I felt funny inside, as if something was dropping out of me. I would've murdered her. Somebody else had just beat me to it.

But I kept on talking. "You had me beaten up last night, tried to kill me. You framed a suicide pact between Marge and me. You had it fixed some way to make some dough maybe. I don't know, it doesn't make any difference now. . . ."

I flipped my hand back and jerked that handkerchief out of my back pocket. His arms jerked, and he slid his automatic almost free of his coat. I mopped my face with the handkerchief. He put the gun back under his coat, relieved.

I noticed the paper-covered book in his left hand then. Something about murder. He slipped toward the door. I started to put the handkerchief back. He didn't suspect anything.

I stepped up close and jammed the .38 into his belly and fired. I jammed it in deep and pulled the trigger. I only had to do it once. The sound was muffled, and I guess that's why it didn't bother the neighbors, who aren't very anxious to be curious so early in the morning, anyway.

His hands gripped his stomach as he sat down on the floor. He looked up at me. His head went back and forth. He said a few words I could hardly hear.

"Wrong, Rennels . . . always wrong. All the way, you poor Simon. . . . Had nothing to do with you getting beat up . . .

nothing to do with your wife. . . . Borrowed some books from her, that's all . . . murder books. . . . Was returning books, that's all, Rennels. . . . That's all it's been. . . ."

He fell forward, coughing blood over my shoes. I backed away.

The room seemed so still. I looked at the gun in my hand. It was shaking as if it was a daiquiri and I was a barkeep. My legs felt as if they were going to fold under me. I started for the door. I'd made too many mistakes. My life had been a mistake. And when your life's been so big a mistake that it ends in murder, that's it.

I believed Leo. I knew I'd been wrong, wrong all the way. I dropped the .38 in my hip pocket again. I couldn't breathe right. Leo had just been bringing back a borrowed book. That was all.

You believe a man when he's dying.

THE ROOM seemed to whirl round and round. I wiped at my eyes and stumbled toward the door, and then I stopped. It took me a long time to realize that a guy was standing there in the doorway looking at me, looking at me over a gun barrel. A small, bright gun with a silver shine. There were jewels on it, I guess, that made it shine.

A very expensive-looking guy, very conservative and expensive, with a gabardine storm coat, and a felt hat. His face

was brown, and his eyes were blue, and his mustache was black.

He had the gun pointing right at me, and Eisenberg's .38 was in my hip pocket. I could tell he intended to kill me. I didn't care much. And he seemed to realize that.

He closed the door behind him. He made soft, clucking sounds.

"What a mess," he said softly. He looked around the room. He looked down at Leo Harnell and at my wife, Marge, then at me. "This is perfect," he said. "I couldn't help waiting outside when I heard what was going to happen. Now this makes things perfect. Better than I could have planned it. You're hard to kill, Mr. Rennels. I was out there watching with binoculars to see if the boys did a complete job on you. Soon as I saw they didn't, I decided to come here and finish it myself."

It was crazy. I'd never seen him before. "You're the one who's been trying to do it then? Why?"

He smiled. Even, white teeth. "It's all right to explain it to you," he said. "You deserve that much of a break, I suppose." He moved closer. "I'm going to kill you with this dead gentleman's gun, and then when the police arrive, they'll have a complete and logical story all set up for them. One of you killed Mrs. Rennels, then both of you killed each other. And the motive of course will be jealousy, a crime of passion." He bent down and got Leo's gun,

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pocketed his own fancy little job.

"Why?" I said. Now he held Leo's gun on me.

"The reason, Mr. Rennels, is rather incredible, but incredibly true. My name is John Southerton. I own several of the biggest buildings in New York, real estate worth well over ten million dollars. I want to keep it."

I didn't get it. I felt tired. I wanted to lie down, but first I had to know.

He said, "Perhaps you read in yesterday's paper about a Mr. Albert Vandon who died with a bullet in his brain? A lawyer who was too greatly interested in ancient history. He uncovered some things about the settlement of New York, and with this information he decided to blackmail me. I killed him. And after that, for the same reason, I decided to have you and your wife killed also. I didn't realize you would be so stubborn."

"Why Marge and me?" I said.

"The details would be too complex for your brain, Rennels, but I'll explain the rough outline. You see, Vandon had uncovered some old deeds that proved you really owned what I'm supposed to own. That those ten million dollars' worth of real estate and skyscraper really belongs to you. He wrote a book exposing the whole unpleasant situation. But he figured he could make much more by blackmailing me, by threatening to publish his findings, than he could by merely publishing the book. But I figured he would be safer dead. I'm a big man in this town, Rennels. Inherited wealth. My life's too pleasant to lose just because of someone's historic curiosity."

I thought of my dream of some day having a million and a house on Long Island. "Me," I whispered. "Me . . . ten million. . . ."

"At least, Rennels. Maybe I could have beaten the case in court, but I couldn't afford to take the chance. This is the deal, Rennels:

"When this country was first settled, an ancestor of yours, a chap named Peter Rennels, was granted a lot of this land by Britain. He deeded over some of his property to other buyers. Among them was an ancestor of mine named Richard Southerton. In this deed was a legal term known as '*possibility of reverter*.' A clause, just a little clause in the original deed which Vandon dug up somewhere. Your ancestor, Peter, had a house overlooking the river, with a nice view. And he didn't want the view obstructed. So in this deed was a clause saying Richard Southerton, or any subsequent holder of the deed, was not to construct any building more than three stories high—so it wouldn't obstruct Peter Rennel's view of the scenery.

"And if this clause in the deed should be broken, the title ends right there. And all the land and everything on the land would revert to the Rennels heirs. And that is you. And only you, Mr. Rennels, because I checked on it."

"Me?" I said. "Ten . . . millions. . . ."

SOUTHERTON WENT on. "Everyone had forgotten about the old deed, of course. The thing was buried in library archives, but Vandon dug it up. And forgetting it doesn't make an original deed illegal. Vandon came to me. He was going to expose the facts in a new book that was going to shake Manhattan Island like a quake. Maybe I wasn't the only big owner he'd intended to blackmail. So I took care of him, with the aid of several men I hired. We rifled his safes and his files, and I believe we've gotten most of the evidence that might still ruin me. But I figured he might have contacted you, or left some method whereby you might still learn of your—ah—inheritance. And I also figured that there was always the possibility of that deed, or a copy of it, turning up. I didn't intend to let that danger threaten me again. So naturally I had to take care of you and your wife.

You see how it is, Mr. Rennels?"

I couldn't see him very well. His outline seemed to shift and blur as if I was looking at him through a rainy window. Ten million. . . .

Not Marge, not Leo at all. A big shot named Michael Southerton. A guy I'd never seen, never heard of, never knew was alive. How could I have been expected to realize that a guy like that could be out to get me? How would the police, how would anybody, suspect him?

"The lawyers might have had a rough time with it," Southerton was saying, "and you might have won the case, and I couldn't take the chance. I couldn't take a chance with a jury trial; who knows what they might have decided? I guess you can see my side of it."

He shifted closer. I saw him stiffen as the gun he'd lifted from Leo came toward me. Sure, I could see his side of it. But who could ever see mine?

I dropped on my knees and fumbled at my hip pocket. His first shot went over my head, I think. The second got me. I think he hit me another time or two while I still fumbled at my pocket, the handkerchief tangling my fingers up.

All I could see was the flame from Southerton's gun in my face. My heart felt like ice, and I could feel the blood the bullet brought. I seemed to see him turn and go for the door. I could feel the blood burning my skin, and the bullets burning inside me. I crawled on my hands and knees and I shot him as he ran down the hall toward the stairs.

He stumbled on a little way. I lay there on my stomach, the gun propped against the floor. I shot Southerton again, and maybe I shot him some more—I don't remember. But he went down on his face and I know he never got up alive.

I rolled over. I heard voices coming. I looked at the ceiling. It spun and turned to grey, and finally it was black. . . .

EVERYBODY was dead but me. I wasn't, and this is a disappointment to me, because I wish I was.

They gave me life for killing Leo Harnell. And the rest of it came out in the wash. Seems that Vandon had duplicates of all the evidence in a safety deposit box, and it was all revealed at the trial. And it was all legal.

But there's another gimmick known as *right of re-entry for condition broken*. That's part of this deed my ancestor, Peter Rennels, put in the papers. This means that even though the clause in the deed is broken by those buildings over three stories high—forty stories high now—I would have to go on the premises, the property I'm to reclaim, and announce publicly that, for violation of the deed. I'm taking back the property. In person, by walking onto the premises and saying it!

That's legal, too. Everything's legal. Without that, I can't reclaim that property, that ten million's worth of New York city.

And I can't very well do that, can I? Not where I am. Not serving a life term. Maybe I'll get out on parole or something in another ten or fifteen years, but by then a lot of clever lawyers will have the thing sewed up for somebody else.

I made a mistake by suspecting Marge and Leo, and going back there and shooting Leo when he didn't even have a gun in his hand. It was premeditated. Eisenberg resented my hitting him enough to tell them that. What I'd said when I stole the gun from him.

I made that mistake, that's all. And as I said to Marge, I'm sorry. I was always expecting one big break, but I should've known that all I'd get was one big kick in the teeth.

But I came damned close, didn't I Marge, to being the big shot I'd always said I'd be? And without working, either.

THE END

Adventures into

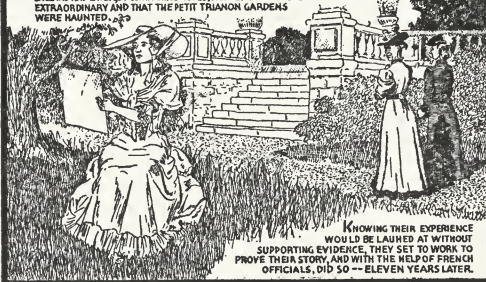
The HAUNTED TRIANON

ON AUG. 10TH 1901, TWO ENGLISH WOMEN VISITED VERSAILLES FOR THE FIRST TIME. AFTER THE PALACE THEY STARTED FOR THE PETIT TRIANON BUT TOOK THE WRONG ROAD AND BECAME LOST. HOWEVER THEY FOUND TWO ODLY DRESSED GUARDS FROM WHOM THEY ASKED AND RECEIVED DIRECTIONS. AT THIS POINT BOTH WERE OVERCOME BY A FEELING OF DEEP DEPRESSION, THE LANDSCAPE TOOK ON A DREAM-LIKE ASPECT, TREES BECAME FLAT, LIFELESS, AND IT BECAME DEADLY STILL.



THEY FOLLOWED PATHS, WENT THROUGH A WOOD, CROSSED A BRIDGE OVER A RAVINE, SAW BUILDINGS AND MONUMENTS THAT, ALTHOUGH THEY DID NOT KNOW IT, WERE PART OF THE GARDENS IN 1789, BUT WHICH IN 1901 DID NOT EXIST!

THEY SAW MEN AND WOMEN IN 18TH CENTURY COSTUME. SEVERAL, LATER IDENTIFIED BY PORTRAITS, HAD BEEN DEAD FOR MORE THAN A HUNDRED YEARS—EVEN THE TWO GUARDS! FINALLY AFTER MANY UNCANNY EVENTS, THEY CAME UPON THE GHOST OF A WOMAN SITTING ON GRASS, WEARING A FULL SKIRT, A PALE GREEN FICHU AND A WIDE WHITE HAT, HOLDING OUT A PAPER AS THOUGH JUDGING A SKETCH. BY THIS TIME THEY WERE CONVINCED THEY WERE EXPERIENCING SOME SUPERNATURAL PHENOMENON. THEY WENT UP STEPS ONTO A TERRACE AND WERE THERE JOINED BY THE PHANTOM OF A YOUNG MAN WHO SHOWED THEM THE WAY OUT OF THE GARDEN. THEN THE UNNATURAL OPPRESSIVENESS VANISHED, THE TREES THAT HAD BEEN UTTERLY STILL AGAIN MOVED IN THE BREEZE AND THEY SAW THE USUAL TOURIST DRESSED IN THE NORMAL COSTUME OF THE DAY. THE LADIES RETURNED TO ENGLAND AND LATER, BY COMPARING NOTES, AGREED THEY HAD SEEN SOMETHING EXTRAORDINARY AND THAT THE PETIT TRIANON GARDENS WERE HAUNTED.



KNOWING THEIR EXPERIENCE WOULD BE LAUGHED AT WITHOUT SUPPORTING EVIDENCE, THEY SET TO WORK TO PROVE THEIR STORY, AND WITH THE HELP OF FRENCH OFFICIALS, DID SO -- ELEVEN YEARS LATER.

the UNKNOWN

Dr-
Frederick
Blakeslee

THE FIRST BREAK CAME WHEN THEY FOUND A LEGEND CURRENT IN VERSAILLES TO THE EFFECT THAT-- ON A DAY IN AUGUST EACH YEAR, QUEEN MARIE ANTOINETTE HAUNTS THE PARK OF THE PETIT TRIANON. SHE IS ALWAYS SEEN--*HOLDING OUT A PAPER AS THOUGH JUDGING A SKETCH!* MORE THAN THIS, THE LEGEND PERSISTS, THE GARDENS ARE PEOPLED BY THOSE WHO USED TO BE WITH HER THERE, AND ALL THE OCCUPATIONS AND AMUSEMENTS REPRODUCE THEMSELVES FOR A DAY AND A NIGHT.

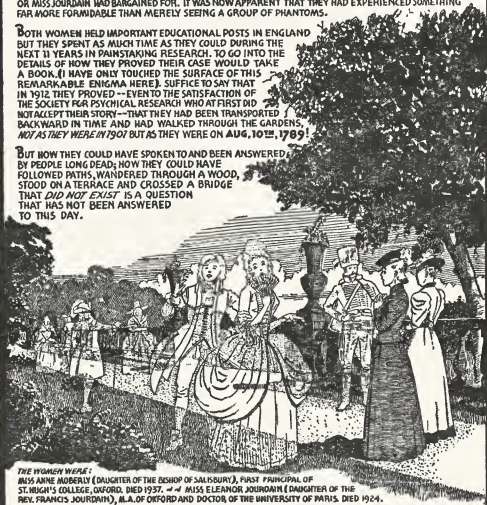
WAS THE LEGEND FACT AND HAD THEY ACTUALLY SEEN MARIE ANTOINETTE? IN JANUARY 1902 MISS JOURDAIN RETURNED TO VERSAILLES AND HAD THE SAME WEIRD EXPERIENCE, ALTHOUGH IN A DIFFERENT PART OF THE GARDENS. IN 1904 BOTH LADIES RETURNED TO VERSAILLES DETERMINED TO FOLLOW THE SAME PATHS THAT HAD LED TO THEIR ADVENTURE. TO THEIR UTTER AMAZEMENT, THE LANDSCAPE WHERE THEY HAD WALKED WAS ENTIRELY DIFFERENT. NO SUCH PATHS COULD BE FOUND; THERE WAS NO WOOD, TERRACE, BRIDGE OR RAVINE... SOME BUILDINGS AND MONUMENTS SEEN BY THE WOMEN HAD VANISHED. THE SPOT WHERE THEY HAD SEEN MARIE ANTOINETTE WAS A GRAVEL EXPANSE AND HAD BEEN SINCE ABOUT 1835. THIS WAS MORE THAN MISS MOBERLY OR MISS JOURDAIN HAD BARGAINED FOR. IT WAS NOW APPARENT THAT THEY HAD EXPERIENCED SOMETHING FAR MORE FORDUMBABLE THAN MERELY SEEING A GROUP OF PHANTOMS.

BOTH WOMEN HELD IMPORTANT EDUCATIONAL POSTS IN ENGLAND BUT THEY SPENT AS MUCH TIME AS THEY COULD DURING THE NEXT 11 YEARS IN PAINSTAKING RESEARCH. TO GO INTO THE DETAILS OF HOW THEY PROVED THEIR CASE WOULD TAKE A BOOK. (I HAVE ONLY TOUCHED THE SURFACE OF THIS REMARKABLE ENIGMA HERE). SUFFICE TO SAY THAT IN 1912 THEY PROVED--EVEN TO THE SATISFACTION OF THE SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH WHO AT FIRST DID NOT ACCEPT THEIR STORY--THAT THEY HAD BEEN TRANSPORTED BACKWARD IN TIME AND HAD WALKED THROUGH THE GARDENS, *NOT AS THEY WERE IN 1901 BUT AS THEY WERE ON AUG. 10TH, 1789!*

BUT HOW THEY COULD HAVE SPOKEN TO AND BEEN ANSWERED BY PEOPLE LONG DEAD; HOW THEY COULD HAVE FOLLOWED PATHS, WANDERED THROUGH A WOOD, STOOD ON A TERRACE AND CROSSED A BRIDGE THAT *DID NOT EXIST* IS A QUESTION THAT HAS NOT BEEN ANSWERED TO THIS DAY.

THE WOMEN WERE:

MISS ANNE MOBERLY (DAUGHTER OF THE BISHOP OF SALISBURY), FIRST PRINCIPAL OF ST. MUGH'S COLLEGE, OXFORD. DIED 1937. and MISS ELEANOR JOURDAIN (DAUGHTER OF THE REV. FRANCIS JOURDAIN), B.A. OF OXFORD AND DOCTOR OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PARIS. DIED 1924.



WHEN THE DEAD

TALK!

Old Pop talked to corpses. But that wasn't so strange. The strange part was this: They answered him right back!

MICKEY JEROME shifted the weight of his camera and pushed open the door to the city morgue's dead room. A gust of chill, dank air greeted him, and inside, far across the big shadowy room, he saw old Pop Hansen, the night attendant, talking. Anyway, Pop, his white hair shining



By
ANDREW FELL

"So that's how it was, Mr. Gordon," Pop said to the figure on the slab. "I'm glad to hear that."

like milkweed floss under the single drop-light, was nodding and gesturing with his corncob pipe and speaking. Only there wasn't anyone there for him to talk to.

Unless you wanted to count the sheet-covered stiff stretched out on a rolling table in front of Pop as somebody.

Mickey Jerome felt a little shiver crawl up his spine, like a centipede with frozen feet. Everyone knew that after thirty years as night attendant at the morgue, little Pop Hansen was screwy. Harmless, but missing a lot of his marbles. Just the same, Mickey could never get used to seeing Pop carry on his long conversations with the "guests." The way Pop spoke so earnestly, then paused as if listening to a reply, then spoke again, was so realistic Mickey had to restrain an impulse to try to catch what the corpse was saying.

As the photographer watched, the little man, after listening for a moment, nodded respectfully to the dead body on the morgue table.

"So that's how it was, Mr. Gordon," he said, in the soft, whispering voice that got on Mickey's nerves worse than the grating of a coal shovel on concrete. "Young Professor Wainwright out at the college? Because of his sister? . . . Sure, I understand. And you say they're not going to catch him? . . . I'm glad to hear that. Begging your pardon, but don't you think that's how it ought to be? . . . I thought you'd think so. Things look different after a man's dead. But then, that's only natural."

TOM ELLISON, the *Chronicle's* crime reporter, came in behind Mickey and snorted.

"Pop's talking to the guests again, I see. If he isn't careful, the boys in white coats will back their hack up here some night and haul him off. You ever hear him make his speech of welcome to a newly arrived stiff? Telling the corpse not to be frightened, that it's all right and he'll soon

get used to being dead and there's a better place than this to go on to, and all that? Better than listening to a ghost story."

He closed the door, and they started across the big basement room, one end of which was a refrigeration room. The city fathers didn't believe in spending money on frills. The place was just an old meat warehouse with the original ice-box converted into preserving two-legged instead of four-legged carcasses.

"Hey, Pop," the reporter called. "Pop Hansen."

Pop turned, with the vague little smile he gave everyone, living or dead, in one piece or twelve.

"Why, hello, boys," he breathed. "What brings you way out here at this time of night?"

"A job. You can bet we're not here for fun. We want a shot of Harley Gordon laid out cold on his slab, looking like a very dead mackerel."

"Mr. Gordon? He's right here," Pop said. He lifted the sheet from the face of the corpse he'd been talking to. The plump, dissipated features of Harley Gordon appeared, the eyes half shut as they always had been in life, the lips slightly parted as though getting ready to answer Pop's last remark. But the ruddy color—the color put there by old brandy and good living—was gone. Harley Gordon looked very dead.

"They just want a picture, Mr. Gordon," Pop Hansen said. "You don't mind, do you? . . . I didn't think you would." He turned to Tom. "Mr. Gordon doesn't mind your taking a picture of him."

"That's white of him," Tom Ellison said. Then he winked at Mickey. "Say, Pop, who were you talking to when we came in just now?"

"Oh, I was talking to Mr. Gordon here, Tom." Pop always rose to the bait, no matter how often the gag was repeated.

"I talk to all my guests. It helps them get over the shock of being dead."

"Yeah? And I suppose they answer you back?"

"Why, yes, they do." Pop nodded. "When they first realize they're dead they're always a little frightened, but after I've talked to them they don't mind so much."

"And how do you explain nobody but you can talk to these stiff?" Tom winked at Mickey again.

"I guess I can talk to them," Pop said reflectively, "because I been around them so long. I understand them better than most folks. It's a power I have, but it took a long time to develop. Wasn't until ten years ago it first come to me, one night when I heard a little girl who'd been run over by a truck crying on her slab. She was crying because she was dead and afraid to be alone, poor thing."

Another frozen centipede crawled up Mickey Jerome's spine. But Tom Ellison wasn't finished yet.

"Just what do these stiff tell you, Pop," he asked with solemn interest. "I suppose they know just about everything after they're dead."

"Oh, they do, Tom, they do." The white hair rippled with the vigor of the old man's nod. "You see, when you're dead you know most everything about yourself and the people close to you. You can see into the future wherever it concerns you. And my guests tell me all sorts of things that come true later."

"Then why aren't you rich, Pop?" the reporter chortled. "You could have cleaned up playing the stock market or the race track if what you say is true."

"Oh, no, I couldn't do that!" Pop Hansen looked shocked. "Everything I learn is strictly confidential. The living can't make any use of anything the dead tell them. If they tried to, something would happen to stop them. I don't know what. But something."

Mickey Jerome jammed a bulb into his flash outfit and shouldered his way between them. He was tired of the gag, he hated morgue jobs, and something about Pop Hansen gave him the colliwobbles. He wanted to get a long way from there, to a nice warm bar, where it was cheerful and the conversation was about something more lively than nameless stiff and murder victims.

"Can the chatter, Pop," he growled. "I got a job to do."

"Yeah, Pop, let Mickey get his shots," Tom Ellison said. "Come over here, out of the way. He works better when you leave him alone."

He pulled the morgue attendant off to one side, and Mickey went ahead. He jerked back the sheet so that not only Harley Gordon's face showed clearly, but those two little blue holes in his chest where the bullets had gone in.

As he worked, he wondered who had done it. Whoever it was, he was a public benefactor. But Harley Gordon had been a big shot, and the cops were hunting his killer with an energy they seldom showed. Harley Gordon had manipulated the town's underworld with one hand and its politics with the other. He'd gotten kind of used to having his own way about everything. Until today.

WALKING from the apartment house to the night club he owned, Gordon and his two bodyguards had been crossing the street just about six, with the evening dusk settling over the city in a swirling mantle of raw fog from the river. As the three of them stepped from the curb, an old sedan, its plates covered with mud, swung past. The driver leaned out and fired twice. Both shots went into Gordon's chest—one into his heart, one within inches of it. Gordon was dead before he slumped to the wet pavement. His bodyguards recovered from their surprise enough to pump a few shots after the car,

but by then it had merged with the fog down the block.

The killer had got away clean. There wasn't a clue. That, really, was the reason he and Tom were here. Lacking anything else to write beyond the bare facts of the killing, Tom had cooked up the idea of a big spread of pictures showing Harley Gordon in his penthouse, driving his new Rolls, shaking hands with the Governor, opening his new night club, stuff like that, with a big blowup in the middle of it showing Gordon dead on a morgue slab, and a big question mark surrounding the whole layout. Corny, but it was the best they could do under the circumstances.

Mickey exposed a final plate and twitched the sheet back into place. With relief he swung around.

"Okay, Tom, let's scam," he began, then stopped, bewildered. He'd heard Tom and Pop Hansen talking as he worked, but hadn't listened to what they were saying. Apparently it was an argument of some kind, for the stocky reporter, his face inches from Pop's terrified countenance, had the old man's necktie in his hand and was gradually tightening it—an old trick he'd used on many a punk to get him to talk before the cops arrived.

"Come on, Pop, give!" Tom Ellison snapped. "When we came in here you were telling Gordon's stiff you knew young Professor Wainwright out at the university was the one who killed him. At first I didn't pay any attention—now I'm beginning to wonder if you haven't got something there. I want to know just what you meant!"

"I didn't mean anything, Tom," Pop Hansen said, choking. "Honest, I—I don't even remember saying it."

"That's not the kind of pipe dream a screwball makes up!" The reporter yanked at the necktie, and Pop Hansen's eyes bulged. But still he shook his head.

"No, honest, Tom," he gasped. "Honest, I didn't mean anything at all."

"Now, Tom, wait a minute," Mickey protested, "Pop's just an old rumdum who doesn't—"

"Shut up, Mickey! Okay, Pop, shall I make it still tighter?"

He jerked on the necktie again. The old man's hands fanned the air helplessly. His face was turning blue, and his eyes were terrified.

"I'll . . . tell you," he gurgled. "Just . . . let me loose. Mr. Gordon says . . . it's all right"

Tom Ellison released him and watched grimly while Pop Hansen pulled the necktie loose and took a long, gasping breath of air.

"All right," he said, "spill it! Why did you say Professor Wainwright, the boy genius out at State College, killed Gordon?"

The little man smoothed his coat and straightened up with feeble dignity.

"Because Mr. Gordon told me so," he said. "I was having a talk with him when you came in, and he was telling me all about it."

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" Mickey Jerome exploded, but Tom waved him to silence.

"Go on, Pop," he said, his eyes glittering. "Gordon told you young Wainwright killed him. Why?"

"Because of a girl," Pop said. "Wainwright's sister, Gloria. She wanted to be a singer, and Harley Gordon gave her a job singing in his night club. Then something happened. Gordon wouldn't tell me what. He was ashamed of it. But they said she'd had a breakdown. She's in a sanitarium back East now. That's why Professor Wainwright killed him."

"He's as screwy as a bedbug, Tom," Mickey Jerome protested, but the reporter was nodding.

"Thanks, Pop, for the tip," he said mockingly. "We're going to follow it up. If it's true, we'll cut you in for some of the reward money."

"It won't do you any good to try to arrest Professor Wainwright," Pop Hansen told him. "The case isn't meant to be solved. Mr. Gordon says it isn't. So you won't be able to do anything about it."

"That's a matter of opinion," Ellison said. "Come on, Mickey. We're driving out to State College to have a confidential midnight chat with that brilliant young physicist and pistol shot—Professor Andrew Wainwright."

"BUT this is nuts, Tom," Mickey Jerome said helplessly, as Ellison's convertible knifed through the foggy darkness along the deserted boulevard. "Pop's been off his rockers for years. Nothing he says is worth a used postage stamp."

"Sure he's got goose eggs where his brains should be," the reporter agreed, "But just the same he knows something. Listen. Six months ago a redhead named Gloria Wain went to work for Gordon. Three months ago, she disappeared—just vanished. Suppose Wain was short for Wainwright?"

"Well, maybe," Mickey agreed. "But just the same—"

"Forget it and listen. Wainwright is still young enough to decide to carry out a little execution by himself. He was in the Army and had a brilliant record. He's a crack pistol shot—placed second in the state matches last year. I've said all along that Gordon's killing wasn't tied in with the underworld but was an execution by a private party—and Wainwright fits my specifications for that private party like a banana skin fits a banana."

"But how could Pop know about it?" Mickey Jerome protested. "That bushwah about Gordon telling it to him after he was murdered—aw, Tom, you can't believe that."

"Of course not, stupid. That's just Pop's little obsession. What probably happened was that some of Gordon's boys visited the morgue this evening to look

at the boss, and spilled the dope where Pop could overhear it."

"But that's not logical," Mickey protested, wrapping his old ulster around his scrawny body as raw wind came through between the windshield and the top. "If Gordon's boys knew anything, they'd have spilled it to the cops or finished off Wainwright himself before this."

"Well, maybe Pop picked up the dope some place else. How do I know?" Tom said. "But I do know it hangs together enough to be worth checking on. Here's the entrance to the college grounds. That's Wainwright's house up there at the top of the hill. There's a light on. We'll just bust right in on him and take him by surprise—tell him someone claims to have witnessed him driving away from the murder scene and how about it?"

He swung into the entranceway with a screech of tires. Mickey Jerome pulled his ulster still tighter and tried to keep his teeth from chattering. Maybe he was getting the grippe. Whatever it was, he felt awful. The one thing he didn't want to do was have any more connection with Harley Gordon's murder.

PROFESSOR ANDREW WAINWRIGHT was up, correcting examination papers. He received them with just the right degree of surprise and politeness, Mickey Jerome decided, squatting on the edge of a chair and watching the tall young physicist light a cigarette. There wasn't a tremor in his hands as he applied the match and leaned back.

"A witness claims to have seen me driving down the block immediately after Harley Gordon was killed?" he repeated, and stared at Tom Ellison speculatively. "The witness is mistaken. I was playing chess with Dean Hawkins at six this evening. In fact, we were just finishing. We play chess every Friday afternoon."

"I suppose the dean will confirm that?" Ellison demanded.

"Of course. In the morning. It's rather late to bother him now."

"Well, of course, the witness *may* be mistaken," Tom Ellison said carefully. "But because of his story we've done a little checking. Six months ago your sister went to work for Harley Gordon. Where is she now?"

Wainwright's lips compressed; otherwise his expression did not change.

"She had a breakdown. She's in a rest home now."

"But you did know Gordon?"

"I was introduced to him, that's all."

"And last year you placed second in the state pistol matches," Ellison charged.

Only the tall man's lips smiled. His eyes remained expressionless.

"If that's a cause for suspicion, why don't you question the man who placed first? Now, if you'll excuse me, it's rather late."

"Sure." The stocky reporter stretched and relaxed. "You know how it is. In this business we have to run down every lead, no matter how unlikely, on a story this big."

"Of course." Again the lips smiled. "I understand."

"Naturally, if you were playing chess with Dean Witherspoon at six . . . Oh, by the way, how did you say you knew the shooting was at six? From the evening papers?"

"It happened too late to be in the evening papers," Wainwright said precisely. "And no extras have come out this way. I heard it on the radio."

"Oh, sure." A grimace crossed Ellison's face. He pressed a hand to his stomach. "Ulcers," he said wryly. "Wonder if I could bother you for a glass of water, Professor? I'd like to take a soda tablet. Carry a supply around with me."

"Certainly. I'll bring you a glass from the kitchen."

The tall man disappeared down the hall and the reporter whirled.

Noiselessly he pulled open the top drawer of the old oak desk in the corner, felt through it, closed it, and tried the next. At the third drawer he uttered a low-voiced exclamation.

"A gun!" he said. "A .38 revolver!" He flipped out the cylinder, sniffed at the chambers. "Two shots fired—and recently!"

"Quick, he's coming!" Mickey Jerome



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whispered. Ellison whipped his handkerchief around the gun and thrust it into his pocket. He was standing, waiting with the bottle of soda mint tablets in his hands when Professor Wainwright entered the room with a glass of water.

"Thanks, Professor," Ellison said. "This is going to help a lot." He tossed a tablet into his mouth, washed it down, and grabbed his hat. "Come on, Mickey. G'night, Professor."

"THE GUN!" Ellison chortled as they spun around a curve, heading back for town. "Five to one we've got the gun that killed Gordon, Mickey. And I'll cover any amount you want to name."

Mickey Jerome shivered. He felt cold, outside and inside. Cold and depressed.

"But, listen," he protested. "The Professor's a crack pistol shot. Naturally he'd own a revolver."

"One that has just been fired twice—today?" Tom Ellison grunted. "He hasn't been doing any target practice on a wet Friday—unless he was shooting up the chess board in his game with the dean."

"But what about that?" Mickey asked. "If he has an alibi—"

"I'm not worrying about his alibi. Maybe he's pulling the old altered-clock gag. He could have set the clock forward when the old duffer wasn't looking, set it right later. I'm so positive Pop's dope was right and this is the murder gun, that before we even go to Police Headquarters to have Ballistics check the gun, we're going to put a little pressure on Pop to make him tell where he really got the dope he spilled."

"No, Tom." Mickey pleaded. "Let's not go back there tonight. Let's take the gun to Headquarters. I couldn't face talking to Pop again."

"You think I like it? But just the same we're going there. If necessary, we'll slap Pop around a little. By the time we've finished with him he'll forget all about

talking to his dead guests and give us the straight dope."

"Maybe, but I wish— Tom, look out! Coming around the curve at us—*look out!*"

It was, of all things to be out on the road after midnight, a hearse, cutting the corner too wide and bearing straight down on them, its headlights blinding. Tom Ellison jerked the wheel convulsively, and the convertible veered against a curbing, climbed over it, then spun toward a retaining wall that edged a fifty-foot gully.

The reporter fought the wheel for a moment, but their skid on the slick wet grass grew wilder, and he lunged for the door.

"Mickey!" he yelled. "We're going over! Jump for it! We're going—"

That was the last thing Mickey Jerome heard. That and the crash, when metal, glass, and stone all screamed simultaneously. Then nothing. . . .

HARRY DANVERS, night city editor of the *Chronicle*, stood for a moment just inside the door of the dead room. Far across the shadowy morgue room Pop Hansen was standing beside a pair of sheeted figures on two rolling morgue tables, gesturing with his pipe as he talked.

"Hey, Pop!" Danvers called irritably, and the old man turned.

"Why, hello, Mr. Danvers," he answered. "It's a long time since I've seen you down here."

"I know it," Danvers snapped. "I'm here on business—the Harley Gordon killing. Listen, Pop. The cops found a gun in the wreck of Tom Ellison's convertible. That gun fired the bullets that killed Harley Gordon!"

"It did?" The little man's blue eyes opened wide. "Why, that makes it look as if Tom had solved the case, doesn't it?"

"It darned well does," Danvers grunted. "But we haven't any idea where he got

(Continued on page 113)



He never liked to think of that night, when he'd stood there, shovel in hand. . . .

By
HENRY GUTH

THE SHOVEL

LLOYD JASON knew that he could break out of this jail quite easily if he wanted to. It was a little country jail, with an old-fashioned iron door and lock. He could pick locks, better ones than this, as his hands were sensitive.

All he needed was a piece of wire or

His wife was quite mad, Lloyd Jason decided. But he'd protect her. He'd take the blame for the murder and go to jail. And then—and then, he'd break out—by digging a hole right spang through to China!

something to bend into shape, and he'd be free. He had a hairpin in his shirt pocket. The hairpin would do it. But he didn't want to break out yet. First he had to settle something that was important to him—and this jail was the only place he could do it.

He had thought about it a great deal, but there was still something missing. He had to find out what it was.

He lifted the stump of his right leg and swung his weight onto his left. He pounded the iron door with his wooden leg.

The constable came running.

"Send for Molly," Jason said.

The constable pulled his mustache, studied Jason the way he always seemed to be studying him and trying to figure him out, and went back to his office.

Jason could hear him talk to the telephone operator.

He put the wooden peg-leg under the steel cot, feeling satisfied, and looked around.

There wasn't much to see. Three brick walls, the door, and a small barred window. The steel cot, the bowl, and his thick-soled shoe on the concrete floor. A naked bulb hung down two feet from the geometric center of the stained-oak ceiling. The cell was probably eight-by-six, and it comprised the whole jail of Hatzburg, Pennsylvania.

PRETTY soon Molly came. She must have been close by to come so quickly.

"Hello, honey," she said, and stood uncertainly just outside the door, trying to smile.

Jason looked at her through the bars and studied her face. It was a hard face to read.

Molly was beautiful. Like a soft, black-haired angel. It made a kind of music inside when you looked at her. But her eyes were a discord in the music. You couldn't put a finger on it, because at first the eyes

seemed just beautiful brown eyes. It was only when you looked close that you spotted something lurking inside there, but you couldn't tell what it was.

But it made no difference. He knew how Molly was without reading her face. He ought to, because he had lived with her for two years, and the first year a man couldn't ask for a better wife.

It was the second year that he couldn't think about. The leg and all. If he did think about it, a pain and a kind of rage would worry around inside him and gnaw through his system like ice-cold worms.

Molly had killed their son. Strangled the year-old baby in cold blood just as though it were an enemy and not of her own flesh. It was a brutal, calculating thing, and a sane man would grind his mind into utter confusion trying to understand how she could do it.

Sometimes Molly could be so still and quiet you almost wondered whether she was alive. She was so unnaturally patient it worried you.

At other times Molly would be gay and twinkly-eyed like a girl-child, and radiant and so full of fun you wanted to leap over houses with her.

You couldn't figure her out. She twisted things around, in her mind and when she talked. Her moods varied and shifted unevenly, like tumbleweeds being blown over the sand, stopping and starting at illogical times and for no reasons that you could make out. It was an eerie, uncomfortable thing to observe.

But you observed it, and you learned nothing, except that you loved Molly.

Besides, that wasn't it. Molly had killed their son, and he was in jail because they thought he did it, and that was all right. He didn't want Molly in jail and he wanted to take the blame.

"YOU were quick getting here," he said, and the words sounded irrelevant and tinny because he was steeped in

his thoughts. He was irritable, too.

"I was next door," she said. "I knew you would want me." She touched a bar of the door lightly and moved her finger along it, as though feeling the strength of the iron and sensing the substance of inanimate things.

"Have they done anything? Decided anything?" she asked.

Jason was jarred by the words. "No," he said. Then he thought a bit. That wasn't much of an answer. "Waiting for the grand jury." And that wasn't enough either. "They fed me, and I slept a little."

"Oh."

It was quiet in the cell. Quiet all over town probably. He could hear the squeak as the constable shifted in his chair out front, and it sounded loud as the scream of the freight train rolling down on a prairie crossing at night.

Jason felt his stump where the pants leg was neatly folded up and pinned. He wanted to put on the wooden peg and talk. It was no good sitting all the time and thinking. Bobby was dead and he was here in jail and there was Molly by the door. It didn't matter why, since it was so.

Besides, that wasn't the important thing. Something bigger was right here in this cell. Something so big and important that it eclipsed even Bobby's death. But there was a vital link missing. If he didn't succumb to the temptation to break out, use that hairpin on the lock, and stayed here long enough, he would find out what it was. If he had his leg on, he could begin to work it out.

Jason grasped an iron bar and pulled himself erect. Then he bent over and pulled the peg out from under the steel cot.

"Let me help you," Molly said. "Come closer to the door."

Jason held the wooden peg in his hand by the straps and looked at Molly. The way she looked chilled him.

"Bobby's dead." He said it flatly and evenly, so that she would know he was aware of how things stood between them.

Molly's eyes were dilated. Maybe because it was dim in here and the bulb was out. But Molly's eyes always dilated when she thought of Bobby, the black pupils spreading and growing as if they had lives of their own and knew what they were doing. It was a fascinating thing to watch.

He dragged himself along the bars to where Molly stood. She didn't move.

He put the peg down and fitted his stump in the cup. Then Molly bent and reached through the bars and fastened the straps and buckles. Her hair, fine as mouse fur, rippled down past her cheeks and it had a softness that puzzled him at first. He could sense the hard, lifeless metal all around, and he wondered what anything soft and growing was doing here.

"There," she said. "Too tight?"

Jason took a step. The tip of the peg scraped harshly on the concrete. He drew the hairpin from his pocket.

"No. It'll do."

In fact, it felt good. Molly was nimble with the straps and buckles.

"Lloyd."

It was a feeble sound. Not at all like Molly. It was half a question and half a beginning of a statement.

"Lloyd, what are you doing?"

"Bobby's dead," he repeated, and it came out all hollow. But he felt he had to say it because he remembered Bobby, digging a hole in the sand, and being angry because Bobby wasn't digging it straight down the way he tried to show him.

Molly looked funny through the bars. As though she were in jail and he was outside looking in. And the strange thing was that it looked natural. The bars crossed right down her body lengthwise, and her face, chalk white, was set like a Rembrandt between them. Her eyes were wider now. Not just the pupils, but the

whole eyes, with the skin around them drawing back and letting you see two bluish circles of marble.

He knew a lot about eyes. As a surgeon it was his business to know anatomy. When the leg came off, a year ago, he'd followed the amputation with his mind and knew what was happening to his leg and what was being done with the blood vessels and nerves. He knew how it would heal under the skin flaps and how long it would be before he could use the stump to walk.

But he shouldn't let his mind wander. Molly was still standing behind the bars, watching him—watching with the blank expression of a lizard watching a fly.

He might just as well start. Jason stooped over in the center of the cell and scratched a rectangle on the concrete floor with the hairpin. He scratched deep into the grey surface and exposed the white of clean concrete.

That was the first step, and he felt satisfied with it. It wasn't much, but it was a start. Once he started he could keep on going until the thing was out and done with. That was all that was necessary—impetus. Scratching a rectangle on a concrete floor.

HE HELD the hairpin in his hand and looked at it, and sensed that Molly was still watching. He shivered. It wasn't pleasant to have Molly study him that way.

But what if you didn't want to break out of jail until you found the missing link of something that possessed you completely, even with the threat of indictment for murder hanging over your head? What about that?

No matter how wrong it was, or how unjust or how ironic, you had to try to ignore it and do the important thing. It was bigger than you or Molly or mere circumstance. It involved a principle that was basic, and you had to prove it, find the missing link, and jail was the only

place it could be done. You had to sacrifice yourself to the principle.

He walked the four feet to the iron door. The peg rubbed on the rough concrete. He wished it wouldn't rub, because it was like chalk screeching across a blackboard. Molly's expression was odd. It seemed on the verge of something, but he couldn't say what. It was trying to be a particular kind of expression, but it wasn't getting anywhere.

"Lloyd," she said. "I'm sorry."

He put his hand over Molly's where it clasped the bar. Her slim fingers felt cool under his hand, like little pickles chilled in the refrigerator. They felt very good and substantial.

He should say something. She expected it.

"Don't be sorry, Molly," he said. "We hashed it out, and this is best." That was the right thing to say. She might not care one way or the other, but he wanted to say it, and ease the strain. "I don't mind. I love you." He could feel it deeply, the inescapable drug that was Molly. Dual personality, maybe, but there was something irresistible about her. Once, he'd thought it was just that she'd stuck with him when the accident happened and he lost his leg and had soured on life and almost cracked. Train wheels had sliced off his leg like knives slicing cheese, and she was there through it all; and after the shock wore off, she was still there. But it was deeper than that.

"I know," she said. Molly looked straight through the bars, and her eyes were wider than ever and he could see a suspense and shivery vibration in them. "What is it, Lloyd? What is it you're working out?"

He could feel something closing inside him. Doors folding shut gently but firmly. He didn't say anything.

It would all be worked out eventually. Molly didn't realize that he could break out of jail, but didn't want to. She knew

about the hairpin but not how he could pick locks. If she knew that, what would she do?

He couldn't say what Molly was apt to do. She was too unpredictable and full of strange moods. After he woke to the nightmare of Bobby's stiff, purple corpse in the bathroom, he had said significantly, "I did this. Do you understand? I did this." And they had both understood it completely, that Molly was to go free and he was to die for infanticide. He had even buried the bloody shovel, and she hadn't protested. She seemed to take it as right that he should die and she should live. The way he always pretended things were the other way around. As though it were just.

It was dusky and he couldn't see Molly's face very well. He jerked himself to the middle of the cell and switched on the bulb.

He went back and took Molly's hand again and looked at her face. It was warm now and flesh-colored and tinted with a delicate flush. Her pupils were contracting under the shock of the light, slowly diminishing into exquisite, tiny black pinpoints. Under his hand she seemed to quiver.

Something was happening, and he couldn't tell what it was. It seemed as if an excitement in Molly was being communicated to himself through her hand.

He could feel under his palm the tiny sensations beating in her fingers. What was she going to do, cry?

No, she wouldn't cry. If you knew Molly, you knew she couldn't cry, because she never had cried. But she was doing

something. He studied her thoughtfully.

SHE was crying. She cringed against the bars and wept, a soft, silent weeping that flowed through her with barely perceptible tremors.

It was a shock to see her doing it. Jason pulled a little away from the door, feeling excitement in him rising and swelling out. It was an excitement that hurt. It hurt like six hundred devils, and shattered something inside, the way a wine glass shattered when a high note struck it.

He went back and patted Molly's hand, knowing that it would do no good.

"All right, Molly," he said. That was useless, too. "It's all right. Don't cry."

Molly lifted her face. She seemed touched by the words, and vaguely bolstered, and that was strange. Even the quivering went out of her; her fingers clenched in a steady grip. After a while she even tried to smile, and that was a funny thing.

"I won't cry," she said. It was as simple as that. She wouldn't cry, and she didn't. The way you lifted a slide and said, "I'll examine this slide," and you examined it.

He felt better. Whatever it was that had tingled in him and set him shaking was dying down now and leaving him.

Now it wanted to come out. And that was funny, too. It was important, and he had to stay in jail to find the elusive missing link when he could easily break out, and why not tell her? She had to understand, though, so he would explain it simply. His voice wanted to break because he

(Continued on page 114)

A good way
to SAVE for
your future ...



A good way
to HELP
your country...

By LIX AGRABEE

KISS THE CORPSE GOOD-BYE!



SHE MADE a lovely corpse. I had to sit and admire her for a minute before I gathered her lax body into my arms, then slid her carefully over the end of the canoe into the water.

Of course, she wasn't dead yet, but she would be soon. Very soon. She snorted a little when her face went below water, but there was no other sign of consciousness. I held her below surface for what seemed ages, then let go.

Her long, golden body just seemed to

Below the surface of the shimmering water she floated, her long, golden body lax, her hair a copper sunburst about her. . . . And soon, whether or not he wanted to, March Hastings must join her in that last dark rendezvous. . . .

Dear God, I brushed
against her body again.

drift away from me. It was as easy as that. Twenty minutes before she had been warm and responsive in my arms. Now her copper curls would tangle with the sea weed.

I was surprised to find my hands trembling, my breath coming faster. Sure, I have to admit it—I was crazy about the dame.

I leaned over and watched her waver through the water. God, she was lovely! It seemed a shame, a damnable waste, seeing that slimly curving creature there.

Funny, there she was, in a bathing suit, the last time—just like the first time I ever saw her. With slight differences, of course. She was alive that first time. Was she ever!

She'd stood near the diving board in a mere wisp of a white bra and briefs. They only served to accentuate the rich curves of breast and hip, the long sleek line of thigh and calf, the burnished flow of copper hair. I guess she was very conscious of the fact—if she'd missed seeing herself in a mirror she could see her beauty reflected in the faces of a dozen ogling males.

Well, you know it's a funny thing, but though I'm no movie star for looks, I couldn't count the number of women who have drooled down my shirt front while I still had a yen for them, or cried when I gave them the brushoff. I'm only middling in every way I suppose—middle size, ordinary face and voice, and so on.

But women? Say, drop me in a desert and I'll snap my fingers and stage a love scene a half-hour after I get there. Call it sex-appeal, or *It*, or what-have-you. Whatever it is—I've got it.

I DIDN'T even make a play for her. Just stood there waiting. Sure enough, it worked. It always does.

"Not going in?" her husky, "confidentially-darling" voice breathed at my elbow.

I tilted my head just a trifle, looked straight into her eyes, my own narrowed.

"You?"

She was intrigued by the terse reply.

"I might. Why not come in with me? The water's grand, so I've been told."

She pulled an emerald-green cap over her thick mane, tucking it up under. I glanced from the green cap to the wide green eyes, then back again.

"Match," I grunted.

She understood the compliment and laughed, scarlet lips curling, slightly freckled nose wrinkling.

"You'll never get tired talking, Mister—Mister—"

"March Hastings. You?"

"Norma Elliott. Stenographer—or secretary—at Bradley Court." I shaded my eyes quickly, as though against the glare of the afternoon sun, but actually to hide the startled, exultant leaping in them. I was shot with luck. To think I'd come all the way to this whistlestop town to try to gain access to Bradley Court, hoping against hope there'd be a woman secretary or parlour maid or something, and—Lord, what a woman! I'd known a woman would make my work easier, provide easy access to the house, but I'd expected it would be some blushing adolescent, or a plain, bony husband-hunter.

It wouldn't all be work now—not with a female like Norma Elliott to cushion the work hours.

"Bradley Court? Where's that? Never heard of the place," I said to her now.

"Never heard of Bradley Court? Why, you must have. That's where Samuel Traynor lives. The writer, you know. A bit of an eccentric."

I didn't want to ham it up too much either. "Traynor? Sure—guess I have," I said casually. "Just didn't realize he lived around here. Don't do much reading myself. Afraid I'm not interested in books."

No, not much. Not books in general, that is. Just in one thin little volume—a book of poetry, of all things!

"It's a thin little blue book," the man

who sent me here had told me. "A first edition. I saw it last summer at a literary tea I attended at Bradley Court, and I offered then to buy it from Traynor—for a small sum of course. I couldn't give him an inkling of its true value. He refused to sell. Has some kind of sentimental attachment to it. I want it for my private collection. I intend to have it."

"How?" I'd asked.

"You'll get it for me."

"And you think Traynor won't have it under lock and key?"

"Not yet. He's a recluse, and in addition he's been virtually under cover for a year working on a novel. He's still not aware of its actual value—and you'll get it for me before he is. It will be worth it for you to take the risk."

Crazy, of course. No, not me. I wasn't taking much of a risk, and I'd be making a small fortune. But imagine a guy going to that length, paying what he was paying me, to get his mitts on a bunch of dusty pages that no one but he would ever see! Writers are a dopy bunch, if you ask me, but the nuts that collect their stuff are even worse, the way I see it.

But that line of thought is getting away from Norma Elliott. No man in his right mind would go in that direction. She was like a warm radiator in a cold room. You knew right where you wanted to head.

She didn't splash and giggle and gasp with mock fright when we went in that first day. Her stroke was long and even, and smooth as silk—smooth as the satin curves of her. We swam shoulder to shoulder. She laughed and talked in a casual, friendly way, telling me about her employer, her work, the town, a few miles from the lake where we were swimming, and so on.

It was getting late in the season. Fewer and fewer pleasure seekers were coming out now, so she said.

She swam well, so I said.

"Call me sea weed," she said, grinning. "I've practically lived in the water all my life. Not sea water, of course, but inland. I've almost taken roots in it and flourished there. It's a second home to me."

She didn't know how grimly real and prophetic those words were. A second home. . . .

Of course, I didn't know then either, did I?

THE NEXT two evenings I met her at the town's one and only soda fountain after her day's work. The second night she asked me to meet her at the house.

"Mr. Traynor doesn't mind. He's a good egg. You'd like him."

I wasn't at all anxious to meet him. It wasn't necessary. All I wanted to do was get that book and get out. Fast. Or at least, that's what I'd wanted to do. Meeting Norma made things a bit different. But I couldn't afford to hang around. The value of the book might be known soon, and then it would be too late. I'd have to get my hands on it and scoot.

"You'll call for me? Come around to the side entrance and right in. The library is there, and I'll be alone. I'm not doing any work on the book right now, just catching up on correspondence and things like that."

I nodded. "Okay."

She tucked her hand in mine. To my disgust and amusement I felt funny when she did it. You know, sort of soft and—well, mushy. Never felt like that before.

"March?"

"Yep?"

"You're a strange sort of fellow. Can't you break loose and tell me all about yourself sometime? A girl—well, a girl rather expects it, you know."

Tell her all about myself? That was a laugh. What would a girl like her know about cheap stickups and phony rackets and then, gradually, bigger stuff? What would she say if I cuddled her up and

said, "Darling, I made ten thousand on a blackmail deal a few months ago. Then the guy pulled a fast one, and got knocked off, the louse. The ten thousand? All gone. Easy come, easy go."

No, she wouldn't understand that line.

So I didn't shoot her any line. I didn't have to. She thought she understood me. The strong, silent type. Yeah.

I laughed at myself that night after I left her. Me, getting sentimental. Norma was just another dame. And dames are like peaches. You eat 'em and throw away the pit.

And then I laughed at Norma. The dope. A marriage ring practically shining in her eyes. That book was as good as in my hands now.

* * *

She sat at a desk in a brightly lighted corner the next night. The rest of the library was rather dim. She was behind with her work, and I sauntered around looking at the books, occasionally poking at one or the other.

"Don't take them out, or if you do, see it goes right back in the same place," she warned me anxiously. "Mr. Traynor has them all catalogued, indexed, and all that."

"No need to worry about me or your pretty books. Just finish up so we can get out of here," I said.

And all the time my eyes were almost out on stems, looking for that miserable little beggar I wanted. Fat books, thin books, short books, tall books, old books, new books—books, books, books. Imagine cluttering up a house like that!

But I didn't find it. I noted carefully where I'd left off. Tomorrow night. . .

SURE ENOUGH, the next night I got it. Pure luck again. But I told you I was a lucky guy. I could have done a war dance when I saw that tiny volume there

under my hand. Instead I squinted up and down the shelves in a bored way, then set my back against the one I wanted, taking a gander at Norma to see what she was doing. She had her chin cupped in her hands, looking at me with a sort of sick-calf look on her face, the green eyes soft and tender.

"Hey—we'll never get out to the lake for a swim tonight if you don't get to work," I snapped, not too harshly. Last night she'd been sweetly ardent in my arms.

"No, I realize that." She drew her full lips into a tight, self-reproving line. "Okay, March. Be through in a few seconds."

In that few seconds I had the book out and under my coat, firmly tucked in an inside pocket. I felt as good as the punk that wrote it must have felt when he finished it and saw it in print.

She slid into the car a trifle self-consciously, or so it seemed to me. I grinned to myself, remembering her fervent words of love of the night before. She was a naive young thing. She refused to meet my eyes.

Wait a while, I thought. She'll get over it.

And she did. She got over a lot of things. Things that will never bother her again.

I left the book in the inside pocket of my coat when I took my things off in the locker, but I folded the rest of them around it. The lake was abandoned now, with the first grey mists of evening stealing out over it. I didn't worry about the book. No one would be around. And if they were, what was an old book to them?

I went out, my trunks still a bit damp from the last swim we'd had. Norma was in her white bra and briefs, her body golden and glowing.

She shivered.

"I wish we hadn't come out tonight, March. I don't feel like it, and it's really getting too chilly for it, anyway."

I slid an arm around her shoulders and hugged her. There'd be little enough of that now, after tonight. I felt a twinge of regret. But there was no place for a woman in my life. If you give them a chance to grow on you, after a while the clinging vine becomes a barnacle.

We took the big canoe out. I can handle it well. I was looking forward to the last evening with Norma. . . .

She leaned back against a waterproof cushion, trailing a slim hand in the water. She was too lovely for words. I never have any extra to bandy about, anyway.

We cut the water like a greased feather, leaving hardly a ripple in our wake. For ten minutes neither of us spoke. Her eyes were shut, and she looked as though she were making a big decision. Me? I could have gone like that forever. The air like sixty-dollar-an-ounce perfume, the lake darkening beneath us and around us. And there we were, plunk in the middle of it, just the two of us, as though only the two of us meant anything, were anything. . . .

We skimmed through a velvet silence, over the main body of the lake, through an aisle of small islands, out and into the main inland body of water. Afraid? I've never been afraid of anything. Dangerous? Perhaps. My life has always been dangerous, though I expected Norma to kick, urge me to go back. But she didn't. She just lay there, listless, yet vibrant with life, as though waiting for me to say something.

I set the paddle in the bottom of the canoe, slid carefully down beside her, pulled her head to my shoulder.

"I love you, darling," I murmured. That's what she'd been waiting for. I knew from experience.

She turned her head from me.

"Why do you want that book?" she asked calmly, coolly.

I was stunned. But with the skill of long practice I quickly recovered. Well, so she'd seen me take the thing. All right, that didn't necessarily mean trouble. No

use trying to talk away the theft. It was too late for that.

She lay in my arms, as though a part of her wanted me to love her, and another part held me away. Her mouth was sweetly passive under mine. You know, I think I really loved her in that minute.

"What made you do it, March? And why? That's what gets me, why. To—to steal it. What good is it?"

I told her. Why not? She had the goods on me.

"Look, Norma, we could share that money. You could join me."

She shook her head mutely, her little round jaw set and strangely firm. Stubborn little mule. I could have taken her by the shoulders and shaken every copper curl off her head.

"You've got to return it, March. I'll not permit you to keep it. I want it back in Mr. Traynor's library first thing in the morning. In fact, it's going to be there. That's all there is to it."

"Darling, darling—don't be a crazy little goof. He'll maybe never miss it. What's it to him? With all the books he's got!"

"Good heavens, March, don't be so stupid! He'd miss it first thing. He knows every book in his library as though it were a child!"

Perhaps it was because she called me stupid. My women never call me names. Not names like that, at least. But all the time I'd been holding her in my arms I'd been thinking, thinking hard. I couldn't let all that money slip through my hands. I needed it more than I could say. And she couldn't fool me. Even while I held her in my arms, promising to do as she wished, I could sense the new coldness in her.

You no-good dame, I lashed her, to myself. You'll turn me in as fast as you can do it. You can't fool me!

The lonely reaches of the lake were dark and secluded. We were as alone as

though we were the last people on earth. My decision was swift. My plan had been forming slowly, almost unaware to me.

I held her head firmly in one arm, the hand grasping her slender wrists together. As I kissed her I balled the other hand up and struck her lightly, carefully. She was only stunned, and there would be no telltale bruise. I've administered knockout punches before. You learn those cute little tricks when you live as I've lived.

I KISSED her again before I slid her into the water. I wished I could tell her that I'd kissed her first, gently, in a nice way. She was a nice girl, sort of sentimental, so I think she would have liked that.

It wasn't long until I couldn't see her. It was getting quite dark by this time. Funny, I hadn't noticed quite how dark it was getting.

I had it all figured out. I'd overturn the canoe, swim up on one of those little islands and after a day or so they'd surely hunt me up. Norma's room-mate would get worried and start a search, or something. I might be pretty hungry by that time, but I could manage. I'd be heartbroken over

the accident—but then, canoes overturn easily, don't they?—and stage a discreet bit of lover-like grief over Norma's drowning. Those things did happen, sadly enough. It wouldn't be too hard to act out the part of the grief-stricken sweetheart. I was really feeling pretty bad about it. But it was just one of those things. If only she hadn't been such a little fool!

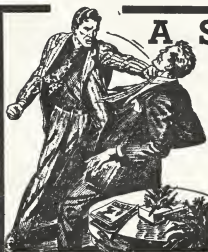
Things always worked out for me, one way or the other. I'd always been a pretty lucky stiff. Things would work out this time too. Just a bit unpleasant, that's all. . . .

The lake was a hell of a lot darker than I thought it was. And the water was as cold as the dead.

I slid in a bit gingerly, a bit uneasily. I wanted everything to be as much like my story, the one I'd have to tell, as possible. It's always best that way.

Funny how much lonelier a big stretch of water like this is when you're all alone on it. Or in it. Norma may be around some place near, but she's damned poor company now.

The water is so cold it cramps my legs and arms. But I can't let that happen. I've



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**DIME
DETECTIVE
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CONTAINING NOW FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION

got to get to an island—and before it gets much darker. Queer how it stays grey dusk for what seems like hours, then suddenly blacks out in two quick shifts.

One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . one . . . two . . . three—keep my mind on the beat of my strokes, count 'em out, count away the time. . . .

Doesn't seem as though I've moved an inch. Shore is that way . . . isn't it? Hell, I won't even be able to get a fire going when I get there. I'll freeze tonight. But maybe curled up with pine boughs I can sleep a few hours. The sun will be warm tomorrow on the sand. The sun? Say, where is that infernal moon? With the moon, I could strike out to shore and get there in no time. Water, water, water—seems no end to it, as though there's miles of it ahead, and miles behind, and miles . . . below. . . .

That first day we swam shoulder to shoulder, the sun warm on our backs. Norma said to call her sea weed, that she'd practically taken roots in the water, that it was a second home to her.

It is now.

Sea weed? That copper mane must be heavy and wet now, something like sea weed. Floating, wavering, drifting about with every little eddy.

No matter where I turn I seem to hit an opaque black wall. I should have thought of all this, of how easy it is to get lost on—or in—a lake at night, I thought I was so damned smart. But I didn't have it planned as smartly as I thought I had.

How long have I been swimming? Hours? Or just minutes? I feel as though I've been floating forever. My arms are leaden weights that threaten to pull me down. Thank God—there's the moon. Just a faint ray of it across the lake. Thank—*Oh no!*

It's Norma. I can tell by the white of her suit and the golden white of her body, she's there ahead of me, just below the

surface, floating about, hunting me out, searching me out, looking for company. She must be lonely and lost and frightened too.

But that's silly. That's damned foolishness. She's dead. And I'm not.

All I have to do is swim in the opposite direction. If that was Norma—and it was, I know—she is drifting away from me. I don't want her. Not the way she is now.

There—that's the moon! I can swim right into—*God, God, God!* I almost brushed against her!

I CAN see her face, laved by the water, her long hair alive in the depths, the slim length of her enfolded by death. What does she want of me, that she must follow me about?

I'm tired. I'm so tired that I feel I can't swim another stroke. But I must go on. How much longer? Tomorrow night I'll be on the way back to the big town, with money in my pocket. Tomorrow night. Lights. Laughter. Money in my pocket.

There—shore at last. I can see it looming there in the darkness, a blacker depth to it. I knew it. I knew I'd come through, that my luck would hold. I'm telling you, I'm one of the luckiest guys. . . .

One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . one . . . two . . .

There. I—*dear God, what is it?* My legs—something soft and slimy, clinging, winding tenderly, gently, yet so remorselessly. Holding me. . . .

Keep calm. Breathe deeply. Now fight, struggle, pull. Fight—fight frantically, frantically!

One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . one . . .

Sea weed?

Or Norma's copper mane?

. . . Two . . . three . . . four . . .

. . . One . . .



IN THIS issue we're printing a letter from a reader who signs himself only "Mystery Fan." Normally we don't print unsigned letters, but we think "Mystery Fan" has such a good point that we're making an exception this time.

"Mystery Fan" claims that altogether too much fuss is made about murder. He likes, instead, Thomas de Quincy's cynical attitude toward the crime. But let's let "Mystery Fan" talk for himself:

"What's wrong with murder, anyway, that people make such a fuss over it? During wartime, no one stops to think about the morals of killing, and certainly during war many people who don't deserve to die are killed. Why then all this stink when someone who is absolutely no good to this world is knocked off? Like gangsters, and blackmailers, habitual criminals and so forth. Seems to me their killers ought to be rewarded.

"The only thing about murder I don't like is its aftereffects. Men who get away with it may tend to think they're above the law. I quote Thomas de Quincy on the point: 'If once a man indulges himself in murder, very soon he comes to think little of robbing; and from robbery he next comes to drinking and Sabbath-breaking, and from that to incivility and procrastination.'"

To some folks, it might sound as though

"Mystery Fan" has a good point. But as specialists on the subject of murder, we'd like to take issue with him.

First off, does "Mystery Fan" know that he's quoting, when he uses de Quincy's words, a dope addict—a snow-bird? That's probably where de Quincy got some of his cynical ideas—deep down in some opium fog.

And secondly, who's to choose who has the right to live and who has the right to die? In this country we've got a thing known as the Constitution—or maybe "Mystery Fan" never heard of that. It gives every man the right to trial by jury, and it says that you can't punish a man for his crimes without due process of law.

Maybe in some places a man can be taken out and shot because someone doesn't like the way he combs his eyebrows, or because he isn't pally with the right people. But not here. No, sir! It takes a long while before you can burn a man in this country. And that's the way it should be.

A human life is a divine thing. In some

(Continued on page 110)

THE LONGEST COUNT

By WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT



Spine-Tingling Novelette of the Dead Who Return

Fighter Jackie Keller made the toughest comeback a pug can make, when he walked out of the stinking depths of the river—to point a dead man's finger at his killer!

"That's the next champ you're looking at, Nurse," I told her. She looked around the room. She looked right past the spot where Jackie stood. She looked right through him.



CHAPTER ONE

The Big Fix

BULL, that's my name, Bull Loepfe, and I fought three champs and gave them a good battle. I got the clippings, all the clippings, if you don't believe me, if you think I'm punchy or something.

I took a lot of punches, sure. I fought a lot of fights, too, and finished on my feet in all but two of them. So there's no reason for the commission to get fussy now. These guys nowadays can't hit like the old-timers I fought. Of course, it

doesn't matter what the commission says now; I'm not going to be fighting, anyway.

I fought all over the country. There wasn't anybody I wouldn't fight. How many champs can say that? I mean there wasn't *anybody*.

This last fight with Jackie Keller I don't remember much about. I was a spar mate for Jackie some time before that, and they all say now that I hated him, but that's a lie. I never hated Jackie. Hell, he was just like me, when I was younger. I mean he was as big as I was, and he came from the same neck of the woods. He had the dream, too; he wanted that title, that's all. Lot of angles to this racket, but all Jackie ever wanted was the title, and he'd have fought free for that.

Hell, I knew his brother. His brother used to be a pretty good welter; then he went into the noodle end of the business, and he handled Jackie. He wanted to be my manager, too, but I had no reason to quit Sam. Sam's smart, and he always got me lots of fights.

When I was working with Jackie, we used to have long talks, I remember, up there on the pier at the lake. I'd tell him about this guy and that guy I fought, and you'd think Jackie was twelve years old, the way he'd listen, not saying anything much.

ONE NIGHT, I remember, he said, "Bull, I'm going to get what you missed. I'm going to get the heavy title. They can't cheat me out of that. Then you'll never be out of work, Bull, because you'll have a job with me."

He smiled at me when he said that. He was a good-looking kid, big and blond, and not a mark on him. He was fast, and he could hit like a sledge hammer.

"Don't worry about me," I told him. "Don't let these wise guys give you any wrong ideas about me. I got a lot of years to go yet."

"Sure, Bull," he said. "Only if it wasn't for you I wouldn't even be fighting. I'd still be pushing a plow. I used to read about you all the time on the farm. I was proud of you, being from Vilas County, and all. If I hadn't read about you, I probably wouldn't be here today."

I didn't tell him I hadn't given up the idea of a title fight, myself. Sam told me I shouldn't talk about that; that was only something for the two of us to think about. Sam had me up here sparring with Jackie just to sharpen me up.

It was the next morning Sam came up to see me, and he had Nick Bolias with him. Nick, I didn't like. He always razed me, made the others laugh at me. But he was a big man in the business, with a piece of the champ, and I had to take it, Sam said.

Nick wasn't so cheerful that morning. He asked me, "Where's Lud, Bull?"

Lud Keller is Jackie's manager and brother, like I said before.

"He's down at the lake, with Jackie," I said.

Sam said, "Jackie shaping up pretty good, Bull?"

"Fine," I said. "I can't score on him much."

Sam looked at Nick, and they both smiled. Nick left and went down toward the lake. Sam sighed.

"Trouble?" I asked. "You get me a fight, Sam?"

"Trouble," Sam answered. "No, no fight in sight, Bull."

"What's Nick here for?"

"The champ hurt his hand. The fight's off."

"Baloney," I said. "He's afraid of Jackie, that's all. You know that's all, don't you, Sam?"

"I don't know anything, Bull," Sam answered. "Only that the fight's off."

"Nick will have to do some talking," I said. "Lud ain't going to be fooled. And nobody makes deals with Jackie. Nick

had better not monkey with those two."

"No, you got it wrong, Bull. The champ really hurt his hand. The commission sent a doc over. I'm not saying Nick isn't glad about it, but it's true. Might be six months or more before the hand's okay."

"This place is costing Jackie money," I said. "He can't stall forever."

Sam looked at me without saying anything, and then the three of them were coming up from the beach. You could tell Lud was really sore, the way he was talking.

"I'll go to the commission," he said, "and find out about this, Nick."

"You can phone the secretary right from here. I want you to," Nick said.

"That's what I'm going to do," Lud said, and he went up the steps to the porch and into the house.

Jackie wasn't saying anything. He kept pounding one fist into the other hand and looking down at the ground.

Sam said, "It's only been put off a few months, Jackie. You'll get your chance."

Jackie looked up. "It's not the first time I've been put off. It happened this spring, too." Now he looked at Nick. "That time you wanted a piece of me. Is that what you're working for now?"

Nick looked at him and smiled. Nick didn't say anything. Then Lud came down the steps and said, "Okay. I talked to the secretary. But we'll have to get another fight; we can't afford to wait six months."

"That's why I brought Sam along," Nick said. "I've got an idea."

He looked at me for a second, and at Sam, and Sam said, "Let's take a walk, Bull. I want to talk to you."

WE WENT around in back and sat down near the woodpile. Sam looked worried about something. After a while he said, "Nick wants you to fight Jackie. I don't want it, though, Bull."

"Why not, Sam? We could both make some money. I could sure use it. What's wrong with it?"

"He's too good for you, that's what's wrong with it. Bull, you've absorbed a lot of punishment in the last fifteen years. Jackie could put you over the brink."

"Nah," I said. "I can protect myself, Sam. I think it's a great idea."

"That's not all of it," he said. "Nick's got the cute idea you could kayo Jackie, while you're sparring with him. He's supposed to leave you an opening. The papers will play it up big."

"I don't like that," I said.

"Nor do I. But Nick's right about one thing; there wouldn't be any gate, any buildup for the fight without something like that."

"What will Jackie say about that? He's liable to get mad, Sam."

Sam shook his head. "Jackie's not in the right financial shape to get mad at Nick Bolias. Nick's played him like a trout."

"Too many guys like Nick in this business," I said. "That's what's wrong with it."

Sam got up. "Maybe we'd better call the whole thing off. You can always drive a truck, Bull, or get a job as a bouncer."

"Let's see what Jackie's got to say about it, first," I said.

Sam sighed. "It's your brain, Bull."

Jackie didn't like it, and Lud neither. But they were going through with it. I guess they needed the money as bad as I did.

The story about the champ's hand hadn't hit the papers yet, and there were a couple of reporters in camp. Jackie went a couple rounds with Nels Arthur, a pretty fair light-heavy, and then it was my turn.

This was the first time in a couple days I'd sparred with Jackie, and some of the reporters had written pieces about Jackie kind of avoiding me. That's not true.

Jackie never avoided anybody. It's the other guys who avoid him.

He came out for the first round, and his left was a lot lower than he usually carries it. That was the path, right there, over that left. If I had that, I didn't worry about anything else. I still got the moxie to put a man away if I can get to him.

I got to Jackie in the middle of the round. He'd just thrown a high right hand, and he dropped the left even more when he tossed it. I was flat on my feet when I threw my right, and I had my weight in it.

Jackie went down, shaking the ring.

He rolled over once, and in a couple seconds Lud and one of the handlers came into the ring to work on him. He was out, really out.

He's my friend, Jackie is, and I was sorry it had to be like this. But I can't say I didn't get a kick out of it just the same. I hadn't put a man away for two years.

I went over to stand next to them, and Lud looked up. "You trying to build up a rep, Bull?" he said. "You're fired, right now."

I saw the reporters heading for the house, and Nick smiling, and Sam looking as worried as ever. I looked back at Lud and saw that only part of it was an act. Lud was mad. Jackie was still out.

Sam and I left that afternoon and went into town. The afternoon papers were full of it, including some statements by Lud about "ingratitude" and "treachery" and that kind of malarkey.

"It looks like we'll get the fight," Sam said.

"And some money," I said. "And if I beat him—we could get the title fight, huh, Sam?"

"No," Sam said. "I won't let Nick do that to you. It's too late to be thinking about the title, Bull. Just protect yourself in the fight with Jackie. Get through that, and we'll find a job for you."

I didn't argue with him. I never argue much with Sam. But I had my own ideas about it, and I didn't plan on looking for no job.

I TRAINED right in town, at Spellman's, trained cheap, too, got lots of boys to work out with me for nothing, guys that needed the workout.

I was feeling all right. I had a buzzing in my head from time to time, but I'd had it before. I didn't tell anybody about it. Three days before the fight, Maxie Salter connected with a good right hand, and the buzzing was a little worse after that.

But my vision and timing were okay, so it wasn't anything serious. My memory wasn't too good. That's why I may have got mixed up on what happened after the fight. But I don't think so.

Fifteen rounds, it was, at the Coliseum, to a decision, but nobody figured there'd be a decision. Jackie and I are hitters.

Then, the night before the fight, Jackie came to see me. There wasn't anybody with him, and I was alone, too. Sam had gone out to see Nick.

Jackie said, "You're not in on this deal Nick's trying to cook, are you, Bull?"

"Deal?" I said. "What you talking about, Jackie?"

"I'm supposed to dive, Bull."

"You're nuts," I said. "What are you trying to tell me, Jackie?"

"I'm supposed to dive. Nick's got the roll on you. He told me that yesterday. He's been hinting for a week, but yesterday he laid down the law. He's getting five to one for his money, and he'd make a mint if I splashed."

"You shouldn't have told me, Jackie," I said. "I was going to try and get you in this one. I want a title fight, too."

"You shouldn't think that way, Bull," he said. "The champ's a butcher. You're too old to take on a mugg like that."

"He doesn't scare me," I said. "Jackie,

does Nick Bolias scare you any?"

"Sure. But that's not going to stop me. This is going to be on the level tomorrow night, remember. You'll be trying, and I'll be trying."

I stuck out my hand. "Shake on that, Jackie."

He took my hand. He said, "Don't say anything about this to Sam. He may be all right, and he may not. He's not big enough to buck Nick, though. It's best not to say anything."

That's the part the cops wouldn't believe later, that Jackie had come to see me the night before the fight. Lud said Jackie had left the hotel for a while, but only for about a half-hour, not long enough to get over here and back. The cops believed Lud, even if they didn't believe the rest of the gang. And the cabbie that had hauled Jackie over—well, we'll get to that after a while. . . .

When Sam came in later, Nick was with him. Nick said, "How you feeling, champ?" He had that damned smile on his face, like I was some halfwit.

"Not so good," I said. "I don't like those odds."

Nick got a kick out of that. He laughed and clapped Sam on the back. "Some boy you've got, Sam," he said. "We'll have to match him with the champ one of these days."

Sam didn't say anything. Sam hadn't been saying much since the day I knocked out Jackie. He was one unhappy man, to look at him.

CHAPTER TWO

Out of the River

I PASSED the physical all right next morning. I didn't tell the doc about the buzzing. I took a nap in the afternoon and slept just fine, not nervous or anything.

In the dressing room, Nick came in before the rest of the gang, and he and Sam

went out to talk in the corridor for a while. I was glad then I hadn't told Sam about Jackie coming to see me.

Jackie was sure in the pink that night. I could tell when he first came through the ropes that he was confident and ready. He looked across at me and smiled and waved, but his face was serious and his mouth was tight.

There was a pretty good house, and I think they were with me, most of them, the way it sounded. They'd known me a long time, and I can say I'd always tried to give them their money's worth. Jackie was kind of new to the racket.

Sam said, "Protect yourself. This was a damned fool stunt, but you can come out of it all right if you protect yourself."

I never got the chance.

About ten seconds after the bell, Jackie tagged me with a high right hand over the ear, and the fog came in with that punch. I didn't go down. You fight as long as I have, you can fight in your sleep. That's what I did from then on.

From then on it was like walking into booby traps in the dark. In the second round I hit the canvas, and I knew my mouth was full of blood, because I could taste it. I thought I could hear Sam screaming at me, but I couldn't make out the words.

I got up from that one, and the bombs started to go off again. In a clinch, Jackie said, "Stay down, Bull. I don't want to do this to you. Stay down, *please*, Bull."

I'd never learned to do that. "Put me down," I said.

He did. He put me down for keeps, but it was some time after that. The seventh round, I read next day. It wasn't a button shot. It was a hook to the solar plexus, the paper said.

What happened between that kayo and the next day, when I woke up in the hospital, I had to read in the papers. Jackie hadn't hit me above the neck from the third round on, the reporters said, and

they couldn't figure out the reason.

Well, they didn't know Jackie. Jackie could read my eyes, and they couldn't. He's human, and that's something new to the game.

Sam came in to see me in the afternoon. There was a guy with him, standing right next to him, and I couldn't make out who it was.

"How you feeling, Bull?" Sam said.

"All right," I said. "That isn't Jackie with you, is it, Sam?"

"What do you mean, Bull?" he said. "There's nobody with me. You seeing double?"

"No," I said, quick. "I—I thought I heard somebody in the hall."

"I came alone," he said. "Jackie—they can't find Jackie. Lud's been looking for him all morning."

"He's probably celebrating," I said. "He'll make a good champ, huh, Sam? The title can't miss him now. He's murder."

Sam seemed to be shaking, and I couldn't hear what he said next.

Then a nurse came in, and it looked like she had somebody with her, too, until she got real close, right next to the bed. Everything was all right, up close.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Loepfe?" she wanted to know.

"Just fine," I said. "I'll be getting up right away. I'm not tired any more."

"You'll be getting up when we tell you to," she said. "You're still weak, Mr. Loepfe, and I won't have you taking any chances."

"That's right," Sam said. "Take it easy, Bull. I'll be back later."

"I wish Jackie'd come to see me," I said. "I'd like to talk to him."

"Who is this Jackie?" the nurse asked Sam. "He was talking about Jackie most of the night."

"The man he fought last night," Sam said. "They're friends."

"Nice business between friends," the

nurse said, and went out of the room.

"Sam," I said, "were you in on it?"

"On what?"

"The fix Nick tried to put on it. Nick had all his money on me, Sam."

"Don't ever believe it," Sam said.

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Jackie told me. Jackie was supposed to dive. Honest, that's the truth."

"It's not the truth, Bull. And don't talk like that to anybody else. They'll think there's something wrong with you. And if it gets to Nick—"

"I'm not afraid of Nick," I said.

"That's your trouble," he said. "You're not afraid of anybody. Bull, I'm telling you for your own good not to make statements like that."

"Okay, okay," I said. "But it's the truth." My head was buzzing like hell. "I'll see you later, Sam."

"I'll be back. Want me to bring you anything?"

"Just Jackie," I said. "Then we can talk it over, the three of us."

HE WALKED out, and it was quiet in the room and kind of dim. The buzzing wasn't so bad, and I was just starting to doze off when Jackie came in. He stood there, at the foot of the bed, not saying a word, looking at me. Damnedest smell came in with him, like the river on a hot day, an awful stink.

"It's about time," I said. "How are you, Champ?"

He shook his head and stared at me. Gave me the creeps. His hair looked like he'd just come from the shower and hadn't combed it yet, plastered down over his forehead.

"Well, say something," I said. "I gave you a pretty good fight for five round of it, huh? That's what the papers say."

He shook his head again.

Then the nurse came in. "Were you calling for me, Mr. Loepfe?"

"No," I said. "I was just talking to my friend. That's the next champ you're looking at, Nurse."

She looked around the room. She looked right past the spot where Jackie stood, right *through* it. Then she went out, quick.

When she came back, there was a young fellow with her, guy in a white coat. Jackie was gone. I felt something prick my arm, and then I fell asleep again.

When I woke up, the room was dark. There was a single ray of light coming from the hall, because the door wasn't closed all the way. I thought I could see Sam, in the edge of that light.

"Sam?" I called.

"That's right, Bull, I'm here."

"Just you, Sam?"

"That's all. How are you feeling?"

"Okay. Jackie was here, this afternoon, right after you left."

"No, he wasn't" Sam said. "Jackie's been dead since this morning, Bull. They fished him out of the river an hour ago."

I started to shake then. "No, Sam," I said, "it can't be. I saw him, I tell you."

Sam shook his head and went over to stand near the window. I could just about make him out, it was so dark over there. His voice was low. "What you said about a fix, Bull. That kind of talk is more dangerous than ever now. We don't want any trouble. We've had our share."

I wasn't listening to him, hardly. Jackie was dead. My friend, the best heavy since Fitz. But he couldn't have been dead this morning, unless . . .

"Sam," I said, "was Jackie murdered?"

"I don't know," he said. "We'll know tonight." He was still near the window, and he wasn't looking toward me.

Then the lights went on in the room, and the nurse stood in the doorway, a different one. She seemed surprised to see Sam there.

She said, "You've some more company, Mr. Loepfe. How are you feeling?"

"All right," I said.

"It's an officer, Mr. Loepfe, and he wants to question you. If you're not up to it, I'll send him packing. Just say the word."

"I'm all right," I said again.

Sam came over to stand near the bed as the nurse left the room. "Easy, now, Bull. Don't get yourself in trouble."

I didn't look at him. I was thinking about Jackie.

The officer was a plainclothes copper, a Homicide sergeant named Hopkins. He wasn't a very big guy, kind of skinny, but he looked like he knew his way around.

He smiled and said, "How are you feeling, Bull?"

"Woody, Sergeant," I said. "This is my manager here, Sam Kindreth."

"We've met," the sergeant said, and nodded at Sam. Then he looked back at me. "You and Keller on pretty good terms, Bull?"

"Jackie?"

He nodded.

"He was my friend, one of my best friends. That's why he gave me the fight, so I could make some money."

"I see. Everything was on the up-and-up, then?"

"Between Jackie and me it was. Bolias, Nick Bolias, tried to fix the fight, but Jackie wouldn't have no part of that."

Sam said, "Bull, you're talking through your hat. . . ."

But Hopkins looked at Sam and said, "Shut up." Then he looked back at me. "How did Nick Bolias try to fix the fight?"

"He wanted Jackie to dive. He had his money at heavy odds on me, and he'd have made a bundle if Jackie splashed. Jackie told me that, the night before the fight. Jackie was mad. If he hadn't been, I'd have had a better chance in the fight."

Hopkins looked at Sam, then back at me. His face was stone.

Sam said, "Tell him the rest, Bull."

Tell him when you saw Jackie last."

"This afternoon," I said. "He stood there right at the foot of the bed. He was all wet, and he just looked at me, without saying anything."

"You see?" Sam said to Hopkins.

HOPKINS didn't look at Sam. "There's a rumor going around that you and Jackie were out to get each other, Bull. You knocked him out in training camp, didn't you?"

"That was fixed," I said, "just to build me up. We knew the champ had wrecked his hand before that happened. Jackie needed a fight, and I did, too, so he gave me a shot at his jaw."

Hopkins nodded. "Nick Bolias fix that, too?"

"That's right. Nick's a great fixer. Only he couldn't fix Jackie. I'll bet Jackie cost him plenty."

Hopkins rubbed his jaw. He was looking thoughtful. "You're admitting some things, Bull, that could get you in trouble. At least, with the commission."

"What do I care?" I said. "Jackie's dead. And that damned Nick is still alive, isn't he? That's the guy that should be dead."

Sam said, "Sergeant, before I relied too much on Bull's testimony, I'd get the doctor's report on him. Bull's a sick man."

Hopkins didn't answer. Instead, he asked me, "You don't like Nick Bolias much, do you? I understand he refused you a title fight a couple times."

"I don't like Nick," I said. "Nobody likes Nick, but they're all afraid of him. I'm not, and Jackie wasn't. I had to be polite to him because he's the big wheel in this town. I don't have to be polite to him any more."

Now the buzzing was coming back, and I was getting mixed up.

Hopkins sounded dim. "You say Jackie Keller came to see you the night before the fight. Was Sam there, then?"

I shook my head and tried to talk. It was seconds before I could say, "No. I was alone. Sam was out with Nick some place." My head was aching like fury now. I was breathing hard.

"Feel bad?" Hopkins asked.

I couldn't answer him. It felt like some guy was trying to split my skull with a crowbar. The light seemed to waver, and the room got dim. I closed my eyes.

I remember the doc coming in, but nothing more. When I came to again it was morning, and the room was full of sunlight.

HOPKINS was sitting in a chair next to the bed, reading a newspaper.

"You been here all night," I said.

He shook his head. "Hell, no, I've got a city job, a soft job. I went home and slept—for three hours. How are you this morning, Bull?"

"The headache's gone," I said. "I'm hungry."

He got up. "I'll tell the nurse." He went out.

When he came back, he sat down next to the bed again. "I saw a cab driver who picked up a fare at the Allergrade about the only time Jackie was away from his manager. And he took the fare over to your neighborhood, Bull. The cab company's got that much on the record. But this fare *wasn't* Jackie Keller. This cabbie knows Jackie by sight, and he swears it wasn't Jackie."

"Nick got to him," I said.

"Maybe. You're sure it was Jackie who came to see you, Bull?"

"Of course it was Jackie. You think I don't know him?"

"You thought it was Jackie yesterday afternoon, too."

"I don't know about that," I said. "Maybe it was, huh? Maybe he wasn't alive, but it was Jackie."

Hopkins didn't answer that. The nurse

came in with my food, and he watched her set it on the board over the bed. My head was clear now, but my stomach was sure growling.

It was lousy food, wet and no taste to it, but I ate it and bummed a cigarette off Hopkins. I felt good, my head clear as anything, no buzzing, no ache.

Hopkins looked tired, beat out. He said, "Maybe you saw Jackie yesterday afternoon, and maybe you didn't. But it's nothing to breeze around, Bull. That'll only lead you to a strait-jacket. It's nothing I'd want to take into court."

"Court?" I said. "You think you'll get Nick into court? You got enough for that?"

"Not yet, I haven't. He's a big man in this town. I've got to be sure before I go up against Nick Bolias."

"I'd like to see him burn," I said. "Jackie's not the first, you know. Other guys have wound up in the gutter, because of Nick. And maybe others have wound up in the river, too. We'll never know."

Hopkins was frowning. He stood up. "There's a lot of things about Nick we'll never know, probably. And one of them is whether he killed Jackie Keller. But I'm going to work on it." He headed for the door and turned there. "Be careful, Bull. And don't tell anybody anything, anybody but me."

After he left, I started to think about the whole mess, and my head began to ache again, and I closed my eyes. That's why I'm not sure if it was a dream, or if I saw them there at the foot of the bed. But it wasn't only Jackie this time. John L. was there, and Tommy Burns and Jake Kilrain and Fitzsimmons. Guys I used to read about, before reading gave me a headache.

But mostly I saw Jackie. He kept pointing at the door, like he wanted me to get out of there.

Sam came around noon, and he was a sad-looking sack. He sat next to the bed.

"Bull," he said, "I've been a bad manager for you."

"I'm not kicking, Sam," I said.

"You should," he said. "I could have played the game smarter for you, but I was always playing the angles instead of the game. I figured that stunt would get you a fight with Jackie, and I figured Nick would try to get to Jackie. If he did, you'd be worth money, to both of us. I don't have to take the punches, so I could think about things like that. I didn't worry about you, not nearly enough. And here you are."

"You know Nick tried to fix Jackie, then?"

He shook his head. "I couldn't prove it. But I believe you. And it's something Nick would try. There are too many guys like Nick in this business today."

"There'll be one less when Hopkins gets through," I said.

Again Sam shook his head. "Hopkins is stopped right now. Even Lud doesn't know anything. Or if he does, he's not saying anything. That cab driver's statement is signed and witnessed, and he's sworn the passenger wasn't Jackie. Hopkins will be on another case tomorrow."

"It can't be," I said.

"That's the way it is. Bull, I've got your clothes here, and as soon as the doc says you're okay, we're leaving town. We'll go out to the Coast. I've got enough money to take care of both of us." He looked away. "Enough for a long time."

"Run away from Nick, you mean?" I said.

"It's not our fight, Bull," he said. "That's the commission's business and the cops'. We're not the law."

I looked past Sam, and there was Jackie again, at the foot of the bed. My head was clear, and I wasn't seeing double. It was Jackie.

"Don't buy any ticket for me," I said.

"I'm not buying any tickets for a few days," Sam said. "But don't get any

foolish ideas, Bull. I'm thinking of *you* this time, and I'm steering you right."

"Okay," I said to Sam. But I smiled at Jackie.

CHAPTER THREE

Follow the Corpse

SAM left when the nurse brought my lunch in.

She said, "You're feeling better, aren't you? You're looking a lot better, and you haven't any fever at all now."

"I ought to be getting out pretty soon, then," I said.

"There's another doctor wants to see you first," she said. "If he approves, you'll be released right away."

"What kind of doctor?" I asked her. As if I didn't know.

"A specialist," she said. "You may have sustained a head injury, something that needs attention."

I had something that needed attention on the outside. I didn't tell her about that. She fussed around the room a while and left.

I waited a few minutes before I swung my legs out of the bed. I was a little weak, and some dizziness came for a second, but it went away. I stood up, hanging onto the bed. I was all right. I was fine.

Bending over to get the grip Sam had brought me was tough. My head ached when I bent over. But I got a suit out, and the rest of the clothes I needed. Then I took a deep breath and went to the door.

There was a desk down at one end, but nobody sat there. At the other end of the hall I saw a red exit light over a wide door. That was the steps, probably, under that light.

I went out fast and down to the steps. I got through the big door and stopped on the landing a second. There wasn't any reason for it, but I was out of breath.

I was on the third floor, and I took my

time going down the concrete steps. I'd felt so good in bed, I couldn't figure why I should get weak and dizzy now. The steps ended here. One hall led into the lobby, the other way led outside.

I was outside. I didn't have any money, but I could always borrow a few bucks from some of the gents who'd borrowed plenty from me.

I was on Twenty-second. The Blood and Resin is on Twenty-fifth, and I walked over there. Lot of chatter in the joint, but two minutes after I came in you'd think it was the morgue.

It's strictly a pug trade they've got, and there was hardly a guy in the place I didn't know. By the size of the hello they all gave me, I should have had leprosy.

Gene Rorig was behind the bar, and Gene had borrowed many a sawbuck from me.

"What'll it be?" he said.

"Whiskey, if my credit's good for a couple hours," I told him.

He didn't make any move for the bottle. I looked along the bar and saw a lot of space on both sides of me.

"What's wrong, Gene?" I asked him.

He looked around as though he was afraid somebody would hear what he had to say. Then he said, "There's been some talk about the fight, Bull."

"What kind of talk?"

"There's been some talk it didn't go the way Nick Bolias wanted it to."

"That could be," I said.

"One guy's dead already," Gene went on. "I guess none of the boys want to be next."

"Nobody thought I tanked it, do they?"

Gene shook his head. "No. But you've been sounding off about Nick, the way I hear it, Bull. Being friends with you could be unhealthy maybe."

"They're all afraid of Nick," I said. "All but me."

"I don't want any trouble with him my-

self," Gene said, "but what kind of whiskey would you like, Bull?"

"Any kind," I said. "Thanks, Gene."

He poured it out. Then he reached into his wallet and pulled a twenty out and laid it on the mahogany. "Just remembered I owed you that," he said.

"Thanks again," I said, and drank the whiskey.

I never should have. My head started to pound as soon as the liquor hit my stomach. Gene turned into twins, and then his heads merged back into one and got smaller and smaller.

GENE looked at me closer. "When were you released from the hospital?"

"About ten minutes ago."

"I thought Sam was going to pick you up. I thought you two were going out to the Coast."

"After I see Nick," I said.

Gene looked up and down the bar, and back at me. "Bull," he said, "you don't want to see Nick. You haven't got the right kind of weapons to see Nick. Jackie's dead, and there's nothing anybody can do about that."

"Not in court maybe," I said. My vision was okay again, and the pounding in my skull wasn't much. Another whiskey," I said.

He took a second before he poured it out. While he was pouring it he said, "I got some beef stew. Pretty good, too."

I told him I wasn't hungry.

"Bull," he said, "you'll like L.A. That's a live town. You ought to phone Sam and tell him you're ready to go. You want me to phone him?"

"I've been using a phone for years," I said. "I know how, and I'll know *when*, Gene."

I made the rounds from there, all the spots the pugs hang out and the promoters, but Nick wasn't in any of them. Just a few guys know where he lives, and

I wasn't one of them. My only chance was to find him in some joint.

It got dark, and I got hungry, and my head was pounding again. I hadn't had much to drink; I'd taken it easy since that first couple at the Blood and Resin, so it couldn't have been the liquor.

What part of town this drugstore was in, I couldn't tell you now. It was a dim joint, I know, and I had a bowl of chili there and some coffee. There was just this old guy in the place, behind the counter when I came in.

I got through with my chili and coffee and looked around, and there was Jackie, right by the door.

Outside, there was a cab parked, and I saw the cabbie get out and look in through the glass door. Then he came in and headed for the phone booth.

Jackie was outside now, standing by the cab. I put a buck on the counter and went out. Jackie was standing so close to the cab I figured he must want me to get into it, and I did.

He followed me in and sat next to me in the seat. I put a hand out and felt nothing, but I wasn't scared. There's a lot of things I don't understand; this was just one of them.

In a couple minutes the cabbie came out and saw me in the back. He sure looked scared.

"You're . . . Bull Loepfe, ain't you?" he said.

"That's right," I said. "Were you looking for me? Jackie send you to me?"

"Jackie?" he said, and now he was scared. "What do you want, Bull?"

"Just take me to Nick," I said. "You know where Nick lives, don't you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "I live in the neighborhood, Bull. I'm going home to get something to eat."

"After you take me to Nick's place," I said. "You're not going anywhere until you take me there."

"Look, Bull," he said. "I don't want no trouble with Nick. I told the cops all I know, Bull, and I'm in the clear. I got a wife and a couple kids. . . ."

"So you're the guy brought Jackie over that night," I said. "Now I get it. That's why Jackie sent you to me tonight."

"Jackie's dead," he said. "You're talking foolish, Bull."

"Jackie's dead," I said, "and Nick killed him, and now you're going to take me to Nick. Better Nick should die than you."

"You won't tell Nick I brought you?" he said. "I won't put the flag down, and I won't make a report on this trip, if I take you."

"Get me there," I said. "I don't care how you do it."

I DON'T know the streets we traveled, now. I wasn't interested in the streets. I was thinking of my early days in the game and some of the guys I'd known. There have been a lot of real gents in this racket, despite what you might read about it. It's like any other game—there's all kinds of people in it.

The cab stopped after a while, and the cabbie turned around in his seat to face me. Now he was really scared.

"It's the bell in the lobby without any name next to it," he said. "I don't know the number, but it's the only one like that."

Jackie got out first, and then I got out, and I gave the cabbie all the money I had left.

"Bull," he said, "I was lying to you. I don't live in that neighborhood back there. I don't know why I had to drop in at that damned drugstore."

"I do," I said. "So-long. Keep your nose clean."

He drove off, and the pounding in my head got worse as I went up the steps.

Jackie wasn't anywhere around. I found the bell with no name next to it, and

held it down a long time. Then I went up when the door started to buzz.

When I got through the door, I could see somebody up at the end of the first-floor hall. It was Nick.

"Bull," he said. "When did you get out of the hospital?"

"This afternoon," I said.

"Sam with you?"

I shook my head. "Just Jackie."

He looked at me strangely. "How'd you get here, Bull? How'd you know I lived here?"

"I walked over from the hospital," I lied. "Jackie showed me the way."

"Come in," he said.

I went in. Some layout, he had. He sat in a big chair, near a bookcase. "Sit down," he said.

I sat down.

"Bull," he said, "Jackie's dead. And you shouldn't have left the hospital without Sam. I'm going to phone Sam."

"Jackie's dead," I said, "and you killed him, Nick. You're not going to phone anybody."

He just sat there, looking at me, saying nothing.

I called him a name I don't want to repeat.

Then, for a second, I couldn't see anything.

When I could see again, I saw the gun in his hand. "You shouldn't have come here, Bull," he said.

I looked at the gun and saw the gadget on the end of the barrel. I said, "You must have been expecting me. That a silencer on there?"

"That's right. I heard you'd skipped out of the hospital. Now tell me how you got here, Bull."

MY HEAD felt like somebody was driving nails into it. "I walked," I told him. "Nobody knows I'm here, and after I get through with you, nobody'll

THE LONGEST COUNT

know I've been here. How dumb do you think I am?"

"Too dumb to live," he said. "Too damned dumb to live."

I saw the gun lift a little in his hand, and I knew I had been dumb to come here like this. Guys like Nick are prepared for anything.

I saw the gun lift, and then I saw that vase on the bookcase behind him. I saw something else, too, and I got ready.

I dove for him the second he turned, the second that vase started to topple and crash. He was still looking that way, down at the vase, when I hit him.

The chair went over, and he went over with it, and I was on top of him, and my thumbs were digging into his windpipe, and everything went crazy red in my brain, and I don't remember killing him at all.

They say I did, and I must have. But the next thing I remember was Hopkins and the cabbie in the apartment, looking down at me. I was on the floor.

The cabbie said, "Nick had a gun. It must have jammed or something."

"It didn't jam," I said.

"What happened?" Hopkins said.

"Was it self-defense, Bull?"

"I came here to kill him," I said. I didn't tell them about the vase, about seeing Jackie behind Nick's chair, reaching up to knock that vase over. They never believe me when I talk about Jackie.

Hopkins shook his head. "It's murder then, Bull," he said. "You can't take the law into your own hands, Bull."

He's right, of course. And I should be sorry for what I did. Sam says I wasn't in my right mind, and I won't get the chair, but they'll put me away, all right. They can give me the chair if they want. Their laws can't handle guys like Nick but they can give me the chair. Then I'll be with Jackie.

THE END

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THE EDITOR

(Continued from page 95)

states here, even capital punishment has been banned, because people feel no one has the right to take life.

If "Mystery Fan" thought he'd get any approval of his ideas in this corner, he's screwier than a spiral staircase. Just because we write about murder doesn't mean we approve of it. Does a doctor approve of cancer?

But as long as there are people going around committing mayhem and other assorted crimes, you can be sure that DIME MYSTERY will still be on your newsstand, bringing to you, as always, the best in spine-tingling murder fiction, riding the crest of strange and bizarre drama until even your goose pimples have goose pimples.

The next issue of DIME MYSTERY will be published July 1st. Until then—don't take any wooden coffins.—The Editor.

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THE EPICURE

(Continued from page 6)

ke five minutes when, unaccountably, Denke attacked him. But Oliver was strong and agile, and he withstood the attack. More, he shouted for help. He hadn't been working for Herr Denke ten minutes when the police arrived to cart him off to jail.

By then, Herr Denke had his story straight. "Arrest this killer!" he screamed to the police. "He has almost murdered me!" At Oliver he cried, "Ingrate! Schweinhund!"

In jail, Oliver wasn't very happy. No one would believe him. The respectable Herr Denke attack him? *Unmöglich!* Impossible! For what reason? Why?

It was a good question. Not even Oliver had the answer.

They had so many charges against him that Oliver's head swam. Vagrancy, slander of a leading citizen, assault and battery, and so on.

It looked as though the police had a good case against him, too. After all, they had Herr Denke's testimony.

That is, they had a good case until one of Herr Denke's housemaids discovered Herr Denke's plump body swinging gently at the end of a rope.

Police cut down the body and looked around the house. They wondered why Herr Denke had committed suicide, and they were curious about the house. Not many people had ever seen its inside. They soon discovered why.

They discovered why Herr Denke had hanged himself, too.

They discovered why Herr Denke had attacked his new secretary.

They discovered the source of Herr Denke's paunch.

They discovered that Herr Denke had had other secretaries who hadn't fared as well as young Oliver. The other secretaries were still around the house, too—almost pickled and ready for Herr Denke's dinner.

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W. LEE HERRINGTON

(Continued from page 58)

walked to the door. To hell with the old guy and his box, too. Allison opened the door and looked down the corridor.

The old man was nearing the end of the hall. Now he was stopping in front of a man Allison knew to be a police inspector. The inspector was shaking his greying head, and they were moving slowly down the corridor that Allison knew led to the cell block.

What had the old man said? "I'll leave you and your lawyer alone. You'll have a great many things to tell him." Allison gave the brown box a puzzled glance. He saw his own name. In the upper corner, an address: 7642 River Drive. Allison ripped the cords from the box, pawed at the excelsior, stopped as he saw the envelope. He opened it. The letter inside was addressed to him:

The value of life, like money, is a relative thing, Allison. Knowing that, at the moment, you prize above all else having Dexter Coulter at your side, I am keeping my promise to make this true in substance, if not in fact.

As I grow older, it seems to me that life, as you and I know it, is coming to be of less and less value. When I was young, the chemical value of a man was worth about ninety-six cents.

Today, what with increased prices in all fields, the chemicals in a man's body are now said to be worth \$31.04. In this carton you will find Dexter Coulter, in a slightly altered form than you knew him. I trust that you will find him of increased value. Talbot Beloit.

The bottles and packages were neatly labeled. Allison examined them frantically, horror growing in him as he realized what they meant. In the week that Dexter Coulter had been missing, the old biochemist had worked night and day to reduce the lawyer to the individual chemicals that had been his body.

For the first time in his life, Fish Allison screamed.

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WHEN THE DEAD TALK!

(Continued from page 82)

the gun. I thought that maybe, when he and Mickey were here, they might have mentioned where they were heading for after they left."

"No." Slowly Pop shook his head.

"That's a heck of a note!" The night editor gnawed his lip. "To have the case solved—and never to know the answer. I still can't figure out how they came to go in that gully. The tire marks show they turned sharply off the road. But Tom was too good a driver to do a thing like that."

"Oh, I can tell you about that, Mr. Danvers," Pop Hansen said eagerly. "Tom told me all about it. You see, a hearse came around the curve straight at them. Or they thought it was a hearse. It wasn't a real hearse, you see. Just like the driver wasn't real, either. But he had a job to do, and that was how he did it. Tom turned off to avoid a collision, he thought, and that's how the car went into the gully."

"Thanks, Pop," Danvers said, with heavy sarcasm. "A hearse that wasn't a real hearse and a driver who wasn't real, either. That's a big help!"

He wheeled around and stamped out. Pop waited until the door shut behind him, then turned again to the two sheet-covered figures.

"Like I was saying," he remarked, "Harley Gordon's killing just wasn't meant to be solved, and what happened was all my fault for letting slip what I did. All I can say is that I'm sorry. But you mustn't feel too bad, Tom, and you, Mickey. I know you feel terrible now, but it'll be better soon. You see, there's another place you go on to. . . ."

And he went on with the little comforting speech of welcome that Danvers had interrupted—the speech he always gave to every new arrival at the morgue.



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HENRY GUTH

(Continued from page 87)

was telling somebody at last, explaining. "You know how China is," he said. "Around the world?"

Molly's eyes widened. She nodded. She nodded and she understood. That was plain.

"Suchow, China, is directly below here," Jason said. He pointed down. That was simple. She'd understand that. A child could understand it. He looked back at the rectangle he'd scratched in the concrete. That was the beginning. "If you dig straight down from here, you come out in Suchow, China."

"Lloyd!"

She was excited now, too. She understood what it was all about and knew how important it was that he prove the principle—the principle of being able to run a shaft through the earth. It was a new idea he'd gotten since the leg came off, when he saw the way his peg made holes in the sand. He could feel an elation whipping up in him. Bobby hadn't understood and that wasn't right. He'd dug a hole, all lopsided and going down at a crazy angle, and Lloyd had pulled the shovel away from him and started using it furiously.

"I'll start digging where I marked with the hairpin. But I'll need a shovel."

Jason paused. He was stunned—because that was the missing link.

He'd thought it all out, from A to Z, and he'd left out the shovel. It was remarkable. Perhaps it was because he didn't like to think of shovels, since that night with Bobby.

He looked at Molly hard now, and observed that a tear still shone in a corner of her eye. There was a sort of pitying look there, too, that she tried to hide when she saw that he noticed it.

It was almost as though she thought he was crazy.

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